Re-consecrating Urban Space

Presented by Sue Mobley and Thomas Adams of the New Orleans Street Renaming Commission to the LSU Ethics Institute on March 4th 2021

*Deborah Goldgaber*: As the recorded voice just said; the meeting is being recorded so that everyone is aware. My name is Debbie Goldgaber and I am the director of the LSU Ethics Institute and today we are hosting an exciting event with two exciting speakers. The title is called, “Re-consecrating Urban Space: Lessons from Renaming New Orleans Streets.” In the chat, there is going to be a link where you can access the report our two speakers helped published on the New Orleans Street Renaming Commission website. You can refer to that document at any time.

Right now, I am going to introduce the speakers that we have with us today. I am going to start with Sue Mobley, she is the senior research scholar at Monument Lab, she is a New Orleans based ubranist, organizer and advocate. She is visiting fellow for arts and culture at the American Planning Association as well as a member if the New Orleans planning Commission. She served as Director of Advocacy at Colloqate Design and was the co-director of Paper Monuments, a public art and public history project which that invited residents to imagine new monuments for New Orleans. She’s also formerly public programs manager at the Small Center for Collaborative Design at Tulane school of architecture. Where she combined pubic pedagogy project, strategic collaborations between the academy, public and non-profit sectors and adapted social science research methods with architecture students.

Our other speaker today is Thomas Adams, he is Dianne West fellow of the Historic New Orleans Collection and senior lecturer of history and American studies at the University of Sydney, he works primarily in the areas of political economy, labor and urban history with a focus on the history of New Orleans. Along with Matt Sakakeeny, he is the editor of *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity* which came out with Duke Un Press in 2019. Sue Mobely is also a contributor to that work. And I can’t recommend that book enough, so ill say it again, *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity,* its just a fabulous collection of essays and it includes Helen Regis who is also on faculty at LSU…

*Thomas Adams:* And Alecia Long…

*Goldgaber*: Ahh yes, and Alecia Long, sorry for forgetting that.

And co-editor with Steve Striffler on *Working in the Big Easy: The History and Politics of Labor in New Orleans.* Together Sue and Thomas are co-chairs of the panel of experts for the New Orleans street naming commission. Without further adieu I will unpin myself and pin them so that they can give their presentation, we are going to let them talk and share on the process and the insights they can share with us. And then we are going to have a Q and A session. The easiest way I found to run the Q and A is to put your question in the chat or simply note in the chat that you would like to ask your question, we will take questions in the order they are received, I will restate those instructions once their presentation is completed. So thank you very much to Sue and Thomas for joining us here today, we are very glad to have you… I’m just going to add the pin and you should be ready.

*Adams:* Great. Thank you Debbie and Lisa for all of your help in organizing this event today, I think Sue and I are going to tag team this and I think we have a good order going so I am going to start and we will go back and forth a little bit. By way of fun narrative introduction, Eleanor Pete is not a house hold name in NO nor would her name ring a bell for most of us whose expertise lies in African American or labor history. Born Eleanor Alcorn, in 1883 her father Seymour fought for emancipation in the new birth of freedom with the second Louisiana Native Guard Corp d’Afrique infantry against the confederate insurrection of 1861-1865, she was raised in the crucible of uptown New Orleans St. Peters A and E Church, an institution central to the cities turn of the century workplace and civil rights radicalism. In 1905, she marries Sylvester Pete then president of the Terminal Freight Hand Workers Union, 13 years later in May of 1918, Eleanor founded the Colored Domestic Union in New Orleans, by July of that year she recruited almost a thousand of the cities most exploited women to the union and received a charter from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which incidentally was the first charter granted to an all African American female union by the AFL. At the height of Jim Crow, and despite the heavy opposition from elite white New Orleaneans, who went far as to suggest she was a spy for the Kaiser, Pete and the CD successfully raised wages and improved working conditions for thousands of African American women in the city of New Orleans. Though few New Orleneans know Pete’s name, soon thousands will spend part of their daily commute on the Eleanor Pete highway. A major artery on New Orleans West Bank. In late November, the New Orleans City Counsel Street Renaming Commission voted to recommend renaming Berman Highway for Mrs. Pete. The soon to be Eleanor Pete Highway is one of 37 such places the commission has voted to rededicate. Sue…

*Sue Mobley:* SO how did we get here? In 2019, there was an online petition floated by Mark Raymond to rename Jeff Davis Highway for Norman C Francis. It was picked up by Lorena Moreno and Jason Williams, two at large city council members, who put forward the change in the ordnance in 2020. At that meeting, council member Kristen Palmer came with an interesting challenge, the idea that taking advantage of this moment to rename comprehensively the streets in our city that was named from confederates was more productive as a policy standard than taking them one at a time. In June, of 2020 city council member palmer and j banks authored an ordinance calling for renaming all streets and parks currently honoring individuals who committed treason against the US during the Civil War and attempted over throw democracy during coup attempts like the Battle of Liberty place in 1874. And later sought to deny New Orleneans their rights to equal protections of the franchise. The first speed bump with that ordinance was that it was written to create a committee, which I had already agreed to serve. You cannot create a committee by city council ordinance only a commission, and someone who’s read all of the city code much more closely than I, caught that in one of the rounds of revision. Also you cannot serve on two commissions at once and I already served on the city planning commission, the language of the ordinance stated that each member of the commission will have a demonstrable records of scholarship regarding the history and geography of New Orleans, especially in relation to traditionally underrepresented communities. But it is also a political process, with each city council member, the mayor and the city planning commission each appointing one of the nine members. Which made for an interesting mix of personal and political agendas, levels of interest, and capacity to commit to what became a much longer and more complicated process than anyone had envisioned.

On the face of it, this seems reasonably straight forward. In 2015, the Time Picayune published a map of confederate streets, places and a handful of monuments as discussion began about taking the latter down. Its fairly easy to identify guys like Robert E. Lee, confederate president Jefferson Davis, and home town favorite Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard as the names to remove, right?

It’s a bit more complicated than that. It turns out that the Times misidentified a few streets as confederate which weren’t and missed a number which were. Take Them Down Nola compiled an exhaustive list of everything potentially named by a white supremacist, it was an incredibly ambitious project but exceeded the bounds of the commissions ordinance by a lot. The teams at the New Orleans public library found more streets that were named from confederates and right leaguers than the Times Pic had. But also claimed a few that had predated the civil war. And it turned out the best regarded historical source on New Orleans street names wasn’t as reliable as everyone thought.

Also it’s just hard, its hard to prove why and for whom a street was named before the 1920’s. New Orleans merged and swallowed it’s bordering cities repeatedly through the 18th an 19th centuries. Streets were often changed because there was a duplication during those mergers. Streets were originally named by plantation owners, developers and land owners generally without much documentation. Until 1923 when the city passes its first ordnance, giving itself the power to name streets. And came back in 1925 to make clear that they really meant it and developers would have to run through them and to get permission to name streets. Developers have to be told twice. There was no meaningful or consistent city process for naming. So digging into streets requires a certain baseline knowledge and willingness to dig into the archives.

So instead of serving on the commission I got to work with my long time co-conspirator Thomas Adams to co-chair the panel of experts. 16 experts formal and informal supported by the archive staff, New Orleans Public Library, Amistad Research Center and the New Orleans Historical Collection to go do some digging.

*Adams*: I’m going to take briefly about the seemingly easy charge of what is coming down. That is to say, the streets that should be removed. Again, the ordinance is written in a way that confederate participation is pretty straight forward to prove. And, as Sue talked about, the tying some what relatively obscure folks to street names is a lot harder, when its not Robert E Lee, but instead say Mouton or Walker. It’s a lot harder than it might appear to be, and ill talk a it about that in a particular case in a minute, it requires a good amount of deductive reasoning. SO that original list floating around, we had a few that didn’t even appeared on the very comprehensive “Take Them Down” list. Which speaks to the extent which confederate memory is embedded in the the built environment in such levels, as a colleague of mine, a political scientist, who’s from the Lafayette said, the quotidian aspect of living in the south and living in Louisiana is that you take all of this for granted to a certain degree. So we added a few names that didn’t appear like Edward A. Burke, Davidson Bradfute Penn, Henry Vignaud, and a couple other confederates. But the little more difficult part of the ordinance, or the more interpretive part, is the language that specifics, active participation and attempt to deny people their constitutional rights, particularly of the 14th amendment, equal protection and due process and 15th amendment rights to vote regardless of race. To those, we also in terms of research, decided that two other folks fit the bill, one is a very ubiquitous name in New Orleans, mark Berman, I think 9 things are named after him in various ways, mostly things in New Orleans West Bank. Berman was the long time political boss of the city in the early 20th century and the leader of the political machine known as the Old Regulars. Berman was also instrumental in whipping up and in some degree whipping votes in the New Orleans delegation to the Louisiana 1898 constitutional convention, and the the colloquy known as the disenfranchising constitution. And the New Orleans delegation was squeamish about some of these clauses and Berman in fact comes to prominence during that moment. The other name is Berman’s most successful political opponent, Andrew McShane who was a kind of reform mayor. He served as mayor in the 1920’s defeating the Berman Machine for the first time. Part of McShane’s reform was trying to curve the interracial sociability that was happening in neighborhood streets. As part of that, he was instrumental in pushing for the cities housing segregation ordinance. An ordinance that was still against the 14th amendment, the US Supreme Court in the 1920s, not known for racial liberalism struck it down immediately. So one aspect of this was adding some more folks along with some of the more straight forward confederate participation aspect. I will also add one quick note on John Calhoun. In discussing with our panel of scholars, Calhoun who died before the civil war, much to his chagrin that he did not get to participate in that, he was kind of a hardline between some of our colleagues. And I think rightfully so. Calhoun really needed to be apart of this process, I think we were able to narratively and rhetorically tie him, the person known as the father of the civil war and confederacy all throughout the 1860’s, was a fairly easy and straight forward one. At the time, I’ll say, from my perspective, in working with colleagues and historians, that was one that I think was going to be question which didn’t turn out to be much of a question. I will turn it back over to Sue.

*Mobley*: The charge for removal was fairly clear. If in need of investigation, the structure placement was less clear. The commission and panel of experts had a series of internal discussions to give framework for who we would be proposing to replace the names that were removed. They looked really different, those debates looked incredibly different in both places. There was some overlap, there were moments of wanting to very specifically honor women as almost entirely missing from our built environment. For the most part, the commission’s metrics and the draft proposal put forward by a commission member talked about support for white supremacy and intent. Both of which are hard to prove beyond direct service in the confederacy or within governmental bodies. On the other hand, the panel of experts spent some time talking about the role of owning other human beings because there are exceptions, particularly, for antebellum free people of color, that are also hard to prove. Thinking about both of those cases, about what taking a line looked like, meant opening the door to is every different in the context in the conversations with historian’s than it is political appointees, the major lesson of the process was how different those worlds are.

*Adams:* ill just jump in really quick, I’ll say sue is being very nice to say that sometimes scholars, many of us don’t have the best political instincts, that is to say that kind of nuance around say ownership \*\*\*inaudible\*\*\* part of antebellum free people of color which is a key part of scholarship of New Orleans in the 18th and 19th century which is something that is not, for scholars who want to nuance and complicate that, recognizing that if we are putting forward 2 things. Putting forward people who owned slaves would come back and hurt this process even if those people deserve honoring. Second it is not out of the question that a process like this outside of the context of New Orleans will expand in the future and to slightly different contexts to remove slave owners. The idea that putting someone today that will be taken down in 8 years doesn’t seem like best practices. Really quick, in terms of writing out this report, which was a good portion of Sue and I’s late fall. Both doing the wring and the sort of cat wrangling. We enlisted 44 authors and researchers for our report of 111 respective renamings. We mostly tried to reach out to folks who had some kind of expertise formal or informal on the person or at least on the subject, some kind of knowledge on the person. That got us a good deal of the way. I’ll also say as part of the legitimacy aspect, bringing more folks into this, we had participation from 15 colleges and universities and every Fournier Institution in New Orleans, as well as LSU and McNeese. As well as the state of Louisiana and across the country and random groups of folks: reporters, radio DJ’s, and musicians. In terms of covering the rest, I was lucky enough to teach a class at the University of Sydney in the fall and offer some students the opportunity to do some preliminary research, some of my students compiled the very early drafts on some of these things which then went through a long editing process. It was kind of a long aspect of assigning this and involved a lot of triage to get the form of each of these biographies. And I think Lisa is putting the link up there which is great and I encourage folks to go in there. It’s under reports and final report panel of experts. Sue, I will turn it back over to you.

*Mobley*: Of course the thing about writing a report and writing a report that is released to the public, the thing about public process in general, is that there are always going to be challenges. Sometimes those are incredibly helpful. There’s no way for a fast turn out of a political process with the kind of research that one would want to do that would take years to truly unearth is impossible. You’re both counting on people who will bring good faith corrections and hope that people won’t waste your time with bad faith challenges. We had a mix of both. It was an uneven mix but it was mix. One of the the examples that has a little of both. Several of the standard books on New Orleans street names that the Times Pic and the library, claims that Leonidas street as Leonidas Polk, also known as the “fighting bishop,” who was an episcopal priest, joined the confederacy and was appointed a major general by Jefferson Davis with no combat experience at all. He had many specific ties to the city of New Orleans, he was bishop of Louisiana, instrumental in establishing many Churches in the south including the Christ Church Cathedral in New Orleans at St. Charles and 6th. So Donald Gilp was pretty sure this is who it was for, so were we. One public comment claim was that Leonidas was a union ship which sent me down a wormhole of the stone fleet, which was a collection of semi derelict whaling vessels commissioned by the union navy to sail a single mission from the New England ports to the Charleston harbor where they were loaded with rocks and sunk to form a barrier. While there was a Leonidas whaling bark among the 35-40 ships that made up the fleet, it seemed like a pretty unlikely source for a New Orleans street name. A much more productive but less fun email from a member of the public offered up a much earlier map of Carrollton, when it was still a separate city and newspaper references for the sale of the plots of land that solidly pointed to Leonidas street predating the bishop confederate. So after verification, and more fun worm holes for me, the street was removed from the list. Although Fox News still listed it in their coverage of our street renaming process last night. A similarly thoughtful and well research public email clarified the question of whether General Taylor street was named for Zachary Taylor who fought in the Mexican American war, who was then President or his son Richard Taylor who was a confederate general. That was something we were clear that we weren’t clear on heading into this process. But we were sent a newspaper ad for property on that street from 1853 and in 1855 were sent a map that showed the street in the pre-consolidated city of Lafayette and then went into the Louisiana judicial library and found how big the triumphal entry of Zachary Taylor into New Orleans at he end of the war was and how many months of actives there were including a lecture at a girls school in celebrating him coming back as well as a mayoral ordinance or command ordering flags lowered to half staff and a gun salute upon his death. That’s a great deal of circumstantial evidence but it does make it more likely that our public commenter is correct. So we withdrew General Taylor as well.

*Adams*: In the third place, we’ve had some public comment and challenges from the Lakeview portion of the city. For those that don’t know, Lakeview was swamp land during and after the civil war, it was laid out and developed by one of the proponents of the Lost Cause in Louisiana. The original Times Picayune map had suggested that John George Walker, confederate general, active in Red River campaigns, was the honoree for Walker street and that 3 other streets in the neighborhood, Brag for general Benjamin Brag, and Mouton for either Mouton frankly, either the father who was governor or the son who both participated in the civil war. And Lane street all honored confederate generals. Lakeview residents, after some research of their own, decided that actually that Lakeview honors Mexican American war participation. A couple things, first that doesn’t preclude, someone, say Brag who took part in both wars, that doesn’t preclude even if he wasn’t officially honored for his participation in the Mexican American war. Probably a war we shouldn’t be honoring participation in but that is neither here nor there. It doesn’t preclude someone like Brag, so this sent me down a bit of a rabbit hole in terms of trying to figure out response to this. Their big evidence was a map of 1866 and it’s a thick dip map, the street in the neighborhood was all swamp land. It’s a kind of imagined about, mental map of the neighborhood that wouldn’t be developed for 30 years but which has these names on it. And the suggestion is, of course that cannot be honoring confederates because it is right after the war. And in a certain degree they are right, they are right about one of them. Walker street which the Times Picayune had originally identified as John George Walker. Lakeview residents suggested it was names for Samuel Hamilton Walker, John George Walker was a confederate general, Samuel Hamilton Walker was a pretty obscure member of the Texas Rangers during the Mexican American war who led an early charge on a hill, basically. Going through this map and this precise layer of the streets here, which include Walker, next to Mouton, next to Downs, and next to Conrad street, we realized all 4 of those names had something in common. They were all Louisiana politicians of the 1840s and 50s, again all 4 of those names, some of whom like Walker, the actual Walker it is named for, Joseph Marshal Walker, the governor of Louisiana, died before the civil war, Mouton was on our list, Downs has since been renamed but also passed away before the civil war. But Conrad who wasn’t on our list, named for Joseph McGill Conrad, who was alive during the civil war and was one of the key drafters of the confederate constitution. So Lakeview, after much public outcry and pushback we did remove Walker street but we did add Conrad street right next door. So all of that resulted in very little change in terms of the map but it is a big deal for folks on those streets but in terms of our process it kept our numbers the same. And Lakeview too is one of the places where I think I’m most proud of what we did as a commission and what we did was a kind of panel of experts. Lakeview also presented problems. Sue is going to talk a little bit about it in the second about the process of trying to tie potential renames to streets at the level of neighborhoods or the level of the part of city folks were from and the different ways we as an organization that, at a broad level in general, let’s say many of the folks that the panel of experts as well as the commission members were interested in honoring tended not to have much association with Lakeview, both historically given the neighborhoods newness and that Lakeview was founded by restrictive covenants and continues to be the most restricted part of the city today. For Lakeview, we put forward 3 thematic sets of possibilities. One in the kind of classic New Orleans way, when something is politically controversial honor some musicians, in keeping with the marshal theme of those streets which at the time, the neighbor is named after generals of civil war, world war 1 and even Franco Prussian war. Four officers of the Louisiana native guard, the first African American regiments that fought against the confederacy and the this set of names, which are the only names that we actually tied to the neighborhood of Lakeview, this one went for and this process as it begins to go forward and assuming these names stay in, I think this is a place and when I think about writing about this, instead doing this work and kind of reflecting on it, again this is a place I think something significant is going on. The reason this went through an I’ll be honest, this wasn’t intentional on our part, we were putting together that report and we were coming up against a very hard deadline for the commission meeting to vote and we hadn’t done and I hadn’t written up this part yet, and Sue hadn’t written up this part yet, so rather than submit it in writing we actually read it to the commission. And the effect of reading kind of whipped up the votes to get these through so I’m going to kind of read this report and you’ll get a sense of these folks as well as why they are tied to Lakeview, this is what I read into the commission record in late Nov. “In the summer or autumn of 1855, a man named George escaped from the estate of the deceased John McDonna which legally owned both George and good deal of present city park. Sometime in late 1856 or early 1859, a man named Celestine fled James McCave, the man who originally owned Celestine as property. A man names Jasper escapes from the person who owned him as chattel, William Martin also lived near Metairie Ridge near the New Basin canal. In the the summer or autumn of 1861, a woman names Margaret Elizabeth fled from John Percy, the man who owned her as property along Gentilly Ridge just to the east of City Park. We know precious little about the lives of George, Celestine, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth. It’s probable that upon Georges attainment of his freedom that he worked along side his wife, Marthy and his children on a truck farm near Gentilly road, one of many such farms that lined the fringes of the city during that era. We can be fairly certain that when he escaped bondage in 1858 or early 1859 it was not Celestine’s first attempt at self liberation. It’s likely that after gaining his freedom, as the result of the defeat of the treason against the US, Jasper became a tanner and resided in the 6th ward. As for Margret Elizabeth no other records of her life survived to us. Like 4 Million other Americans in 1860, nearly 13 percent of the nations population, Celestine, George, Jasper and Margaret Elizabeth were owned as property in Louisiana. They represent just 4 of the more than 330,000 people in bondage in the state. 47% of the total number of Louisianans. The vast majority of these women and men lived lives of total anonymity, they toiled, harvesting sugar, picking cotton, maintaining households and countless other forms of labor. The possibility of the whip, rape and possibility of being sold away from family members and loved ones was omnipresent. In the words of an esteemed southern jurist, “the power of the master was absolute as to render the submission of the slave perfect.” Off their bodies which were collectively valued at the equivalent of 1 trillion dollars in 1860, New Orleans and Mississippi Valley produced more millionaires per capita than any where in world history up till that point. What we knew about the lives of George, Celestine, Jasper and Margaret Elizabeth, other than the fact that between 1855 and 1861, that each took the momentous step in trying to liberate themselves from slavery. Given the cities geography at the time, upon leaving the men who owned them as property and using their bodies for anything they saw fit, it’s quite possible that they initially headed out to the swap land around the present Brag, Lane, Mouton and Conrad streets while attempting to reunite with loved ones who were sold far away. Or secure passage on a boat to freedom in Canada, Mexico or the British or French Caribbean. That they left at all took a non-common courage for the the reason of surveillance and isolation most enslaved Americans never had meaningful opportunity to do so. Being caught a likely hook in those contexts, meant a simple outcome, torture. It’s not just their individual courage that deserves honor but the very real his results of their actions. Each person who attempted to emancipate themselves, damaged the maintenance of the institution of of slavery. And made the entire economic, social and cultural system built around it in New Orleans and the broader south that much more difficult to maintain. In fact, it’s now 3 generations, as most respectable historical scholarship has made clear, it was these acts of courage, in the final analysis, that transformed the civil war from a fight over slaver to a fight for emancipation and freedom. Unlike thousands of others like them, whose names and anonymous acts of heroism are lost to history, resting in honor and glory only known to god, to paraphrase the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Celestine, George, Jasper and Margaret are known to us in the here and now, and deserve our city and nations undying thanks and honor.” So again, I think, there’s a sense of which reading that into the record, more or less swayed the commissioners, and I think if they had read it in advance we would have gone down a different route in Lakeview. As far as we know, those four streets, assuming they get through and renamed, will be the first that get named after slaves who attempted to liberate themselves in America. Again, we tended to think about connection to place in a variety of ways, there are some very obvious ones we went through, Forshey street, which is around Pigeon Town and the river bend in New Orleans which bounds Lincoln park, we suggested Buddy Bolden who regularly performed at the park in the early 20th century during the birth of jazz. Or one of my personal favorites which did not go through, we suggested a remarkable poem called La Marseillaise Noire for Penn street which is a small one block street in the city’s CBD, it is a prominent street in that at least 8 Sundays a year tens of thousand saints fans walk right past it. We suggested the La Marseillaise Noire which was written by a pseudonymous individual, Camille Naudin in the aftermath of the mechanics institute which Penn participated. For those who haven’t read it, it’s a remarkable poem. It’s a call for racial equality and the need to fight for the rights of equality and liberty and justice. So those were two kinds of broad connections which I think are fairly straight forward. And Sue is going to talk about less broad connections.

*Mobley*: I think I’m going to talk about more broad connections… One of the challenges of looking at the streets and trying to place, we understood and understand that neighborhood is incredibly important to New Orleans, connection to place is a huge part of identity and orientation. However, as Thomas mentioned, the naming of confederate streets focuses in neighborhoods like Lakeview which are historically segregated, currently segregated and very intentionally segregated. So in looking at how we might rename, while tying to neighborhood, there are some conditions there that are very difficult to get around. There is also an element where the majority of the streets are named within the 20th century city. Areas that were swampland that were drained at the tail end of the 19th and early 20th century and then built upon. So for honorees who lived prior to those periods, there isn’t a means to have connection to place because the place was underwater, with the exception of those who self emancipated into the swamps around the city. So our proposals for renaming, the ties of neighborhood connection took different and more creative forms. Across city park from Lakeview lies Beauregard avenue, which skirts by St. John road, its outlet in to Lake Pontchartrain. Here the panel suggested and commission voted to go forward with the recently deceased Sherwood “Woody” Gagliano, the soon to be Gagliano avenue doesn’t honor him for having spent his life in that part of the city but on a stretch of asphalt that is especially venerable to rathing steel apples, Gagliano avenue will be named for the environmental scientist who sounded the earliest alarms of Louisiana’s disappearing coast. McShane place in the Marigny neighborhood is a tiny stretch of street, 3 blocks that marks the transition of the roadway Rampart street upriver to St. Claude avenue down river, its more of hiccup than a street name but in 1867 it was Love street where Joseph Guillaume, a 20 year old cigar maker and new father, a veteran of Louisiana Native Guard upped the stakes on an ongoing series of protests against street car segregation. They had relied on legal strategy and passive resistance, he leapt onto a passing white car on the Rampart and Dothan line, snatched the mules reins from the conductor, threw the conductor out of the car and rode off himself leaving he third district police on a chase before his arrest. Over the next couple of days the protests would escalate further into a massive, hundreds of men and boys at Congo square, the mayor came down himself to remind them of the mechanic institute riot and the potential for things to escalate out of control but the street cars were desegregated 3 days later and would stay so until the turn of the 20th century.

*Adams:* So, I am going to talk a little bit more about challenges as well. So, also coming from Lakeview was another challenge. Again, keeping with the principle that when something is controversial in New Orleans the best way is to name it after a musician. Our suggestion for Robert E. Lee boulevard, one of the most prominent streets up for renaming was Allen Toussaint, or one of our suggestions, but Toussaint would be the likely one to go through, Toussaint after Katrina moved his recording studio to a building on Robert E. Lee Boulevard in Lakeview near Lake Pontchartrain. The connection was there and it all made sense. Some Lakeview residents and a politician thought otherwise, and were pushing for the neighborhood section now Robert E. Lee to be changed, if it must, to Hibernia street to honor Irish immigration or Pete Fountain Boulevard. Fountain was an innovative Dixieland clarinetist and it must be noted, white. This would effectively split the street into one name for an African American musician in part of the city that disproportionately African American and one name for a white musician in part of the city that are overwhelmingly white. And so, while the city planning commission really strongly suggests not splitting street names, there isn’t a hard and fast rule on it. This is more editorial and something Sue and I will likely write up in a more scholarly manner. We want to argue that such splitting is perhaps even worse than keeping the current name. As the geographer Derek Alderman notes, the spatial locations of the various streets honoring Martin Luther King are often an explicit evocation of an ongoing urban culture of segregation. The fact that streets baring King’s name that are often split that reflect that especially of segregation often serves to highlight racial boundaries. In fact, even in New Orleans, for those who are familiar, Martin Luther King street ends at St. Charles where central city turns into the garden district and becomes Melpomene again which was there before. It’s a very obvious example. Indeed, I think this kind of street splitting makes clear that here is a neighborhood that is and will be white and here is a neighborhood that is and will be black. You see this across the country with Cesar Chavez boulevards and here is a neighborhood that will be Latinx. The other challenge were a little more equivocal about although in our context not so much and it involves eponymous rededication, that is keeping the name or rededicating for whom its actually named. In uptown a movement of residents had come forward to rededicate Palmer street, named for Benjamin Palmer, the most important pro-confederate and pro-slavery theologian of the confederate era to Earl Palmer, rock and roll’s most influential percussionist. This follow others examples across the country include the removal of one “r” in Forrest in Memphis to no longer honor Nathan Bedford Forrest and in Louisiana more eponymous rededications were pioneered in St. Bernard parish. In 1999, St. Bernard officially rededicated its main thorough faire to Judge Perez St. and Judge Perez had originally been named for Leander Perez, Saint Bernard long time chieftain who for two decades unleashed the full force of his police and many of his residents against integration and was singularly instrumental in fomenting riots in New Orleans against cool integration. In 1999 St. Bernard officially rededicated Judge Perez drive after Leanders distant cousin Melvin who was a relatively obscure traffic judge. Now context here is overwhelmingly important, what I’ve read about the political context of city planning regulations in Memphis requires state approval for street name changes. The case of Forrest avenue the removal of the second “r” was the easiest rout to ridding a monument to Nathan Bedford Forrest. Similarly, the rededication of Perez drive in 1999, in that context, and also in the context to that jurisdiction, not know for its forward looking perspective on a lot of these issues, was really a meaningful victory an important signal in time when it was not necessarily very clear to everyone that St. Bernard parish no longer endorsed Leander Perez’s politics. In the case of Palmer street and from our perspective and the planning level the horizon of possibility is different, it allows the ability of not just rededicating the street but what we were made to understand, as well and something I’m happy to talk about at a more theoretical level in Q and A, deconsecrating the environment. So by way of beginning to conclude, I want to just put up a slide which gives a good sense of the standard form of comment that would be coming in, especially from November on, when the actual new names started to get voted on and get publicized a bit.

*Mobley*: Armstrong made this beautiful public comment bingo. if anything, it’s much more mild than what our meeting ended up being.

*Adams:* In the final main tenor of the comments which someone put together and sitting through a few hours of these every couple of weeks, certain themes emerged as you can see here.

*Mobley:* One thing they don’t quite reflect is that at the e beginning of the process, we had seen a handful of extremely familiar names and faces participating, in really, fairly transparent attempts to pull the commission outside of the bounds of the originating ordinance. So, it’s a little more subtle than the public comments, proposing replacing renaming the names of buildings instead of streets trying to include monuments and demanding an extension to everyone who ever benefited from slavery and tempting the commission to give them grounds of a lawsuit. The scope of the commission was really clear as were the terms given to the panel of experts, a thing with this process was that those weren’t communicated clearly to the rest of the world. Under normal conditions, that would be corrected through the outreach process, through direct public engagement. Commissioners, panelists, councilmembers, offices of neighborhood engagement would have gone to rec departments and public libraries to host events and there would have been flyers and certainly a shared set of talking points that reiterated what the commission was doing and how to be involved in the process. But these weren’t normal conditions. Doing outreach in a pandemic is really incredibly challenging and while the commission had twelve public meetings and received 1244 public comments along with making at least 20 presentations to neighborhood associations, so many of the people who we would have wanted to see in this process, people whose histories and stories are represented in the replacement names didn’t find their way to the process and of many of the people who did, were people who were deeply invested in the answer just being, no. That no change is possible or desirable. And so talks like this are the beginning of changing the dynamic of how we are talking about this process and how we are inviting people into something that is still moving. Moving through city council now and city planning next and back to council for final approval. So please find your way to getting involved along the way.

*Adams:* And I think we will wrap up there and happy to have a conversation or answer questions.

START OF Q AND A SESSION

*Goldgaber:* I will help facilitate the discussion but before I do that. Lisa noted in the chat that you can unmute yourself or post your question in the chat. Those are visible to both of our speakers. I want to thank both of you for that excellent presentation and I want to take my privilege as the to director to kick off the discussion. What I wanted you to clarify, either Thomas or Sue, it might have been oblique, my undergraduate course on public memory and monument is here and I was worried they may may not have understood the problem of people of color in the time of, prior to the civil war and prior to emancipation, what was the problem there and what were you worried about, it was careful but may not have been clear as to what you were saying. And the second thing, I don’t think you got to and might not be obvious to some is, why would anybody of good faith be resistant to changing their street name? What does it cost? What is the big deal? Even if you were all on board and super progressive why would you still be worried about changing your street name?

*Adams:* The ownership of slaves on the part of free people of color before the civil war, there is a lot of historical nuance, in that a cousin is enslaved somewhere and to free them you actually had to buy them which meant you owned a slave. Sometimes those folks were emancipated and other times we don’t have records of that occurring, sometimes this involved things, relationships that we could define as fictive kin. A lot of those folks went on to serve in very important capacities and do amazing things before the war itself but also serve in impotent capacities in fighting against the confederacy in recruiting soldiers and recruiting former slaves to fight the confederates in reconstruction governance in the aftermath of the war. At the scholarly level, some colleagues, very much did not want to preclude us from honoring those types of people, at the political level, I think there are two prongs that won rhetorically, I can imagine what the public comments would have been and I think you can clearly imagine the road of where that would go. Also again, in more long term thinking, it could very well be that in 5-10 years from now that people could come together and say we just don’t want slave owners on our streets, and to put someone up in which there is a question, right? Means that someone is going to have to go though the process of having their street changed again. I will turn it over to sue to talk about that part.

*Mobley:* So no one wants their street name changed because it’s a pain and it is in fact an inconvenience to go find the all of the bills and all of the way that’s your address is tied to things. But that’s not prohibitively expensive but there are expenses associated with it on a personal household level. They aren’t very expensive on a city level, its about 7500 per street including signage installation. However, that was something that we knew was going to be an issue that was raised throughout the process and something that at the very beginning we talked about setting up a separate fund to help people and small business along streets to be able to draw down from so that those expenses wouldn’t be problematic. I’m not a huge fan of means testing but this would be an area that I would make an exception. From a practical level, I think, that is an argument that can be used in good faith and also an argument that can be used in terrible faith, certainly many of the comments did. It is a particular level of obliviousness that allows for someone to argue that the name of someone who fought for the continuance of an institution that stripped parent from child should be retained because of their childhood memories of walking down the street with their parent. Like that you could view that, and submit it, and hear it read and not feel your soul collapse is a deeply questionable ethical place. It’s a place that a lot of people sit in. But while we are talking about ethical places, one of the other challenges of antebellum folks who owned other people of color is that not all of them were fictive kin, they were people simply engaging in the economies of the time and that’s what labor provision looked like. I don’t know and many of us don’t, how many of them felt about it. We know that there are people who simply owned slaves and opening that door is complicated as well. I sincerely hope, as much as nobody wants to change their street name, that at some point our grandchildren and great grandchildren are looking back at us and saying “what the hell is wrong with these people?” Everything was outsourced to child labor in the developing world, that the ecological price for comfort was paid for by others, what an incredibly cruel economic system! And our great grandchildren won’t be wrong.

*Goldgaber:* That was very powerful. I want to point your attentions to some questions in the chat. And ill read Laura Adderley’s, can you say anything about the wide range of the inconvenience argument from other cities, I was surprised at how voluminous they were, and do you view those arguments as cloaks for ideological reasons for opposing change?

*Adams:* I’ll go really quick on that, I think its Rosanne Adderley, I think cloak is the wrong term. In some cases, there was absolutely cloaking going on but I think its actually kind of not cloaks for ideology but its ideology itself. If you’re someone who does not like this process and doesn’t like Calhoun to come down even though you know full well who John Calhoun was and his role in this world, and you’re also somewhat astute and you don’t wan to think about yourself in the kind of deepest neo-confederate way, I think that’s where you go, I think in some cases this is the definition of ideology, you go to inconvinence, you go to, “I sat on my memaw’s lap here and now my grandkids are going to sit on their memaw’s lap here on this street.” That’s exactly when you go to that kind of stuff, which isn’t to say those things might not be real but I think we also saw a lot of people who lived in some places who were very much in favor of this. And I think that would be my answer to that question.

*Goldgaber:* There is another question from Grant, and you’ve already answered this a bit. So Grant is asking, “what you do with those people who are just passionate about the confederacy and we saw those people who didn’t want Robert E Lee or Jeff Davis to change, where can you find those comments where that passion is expresses and is there anything else you’d like to say?” I think it would be useful for people to see those comments if they have been entered into public record.

*Mobley:* All of the comments that were entered via the website are on the website, you can toggle to view comments. The comments that were submitted into the public record are part of the city’s public record those are less directly accessible but certainly can be requested. I would truly love to have those incorporated into the website for this process because I think they are an important part of the record. I also think the last several meetings where Charles Maresell submitted twelve comments complaining about the lack of public engagment are funny on the face of it, but when you get 30 of them, it’s a lot of claims of being silenced while talking loudly. I also wanted to answer Nelly’s questions, the commission spoke at a handful of community venues but weren’t neighborhood associations but the majority were neighborhood associations, and its one of the things I found most frustrating because they were often speaking where they weren’t invited. Which is letting someone else set the terms of the engagement. Also neighborhood associations are a very particular subset of people, regardless of racial demographics, they are on the whole the wealthiest people in a given neighborhood, they are the most likely to be homeowners in a given neighborhood, they are likely to be older in a given neighborhood, and there are many, many issues that come with each of those conditions, they coalesce and intersect. It’s also just terrible outreach. It’s what was possible during this phase under these circumstances. It is something that, as this goes through council and cpc, it absolutely needs to be improved. It’s certainly something that as other cities are beginning to look to enact processes of their own or adapt ones they haven’t enacted. I would sincerely hope that people are making stronger plans for post-pandemic engagement.

*Adams:* Just to really quickly add, as Sue is pointing out with neighborhood associations, they tend to be made up more with homeowners rather than renters. Baton Rouge’s ordinance on this requires a majority of homeowners on a street to sign a petition granting this and not renters. I’ve been interested, after going down that rabbit hole over the particular reason as to where that rule came from, I think it’s a direct response to St. Bernard parish in 1999 and the stuff with Judge Perez drive there, and I mentioned in Memphis, the stat legislature said you don’t get to do this Memphis, you don’t get to name streets anymore because we don’t know what you’re going to do. New Orleans, at least at the legal level, is not as entrenched in that kind of stuff but even in that context neighborhood associations seem to favor certain types of people.

*Goldgaber:* I think that’s a very simple yet powerful observation. That’s the wrong kind of democracy requiring every homeowner on the block to agree but the exclusion to tenants is questionable as well.

There’s a question in the chat about reattribution and attribution, if everyone thinks that general Taylor is the confederate guy, does it really matter?

There’s also a great comment by Molly about the biographies you have produced and you can keep on going, there’s more in the chat. I invite you to answer any of these that you feel compelled by.

*Adams:* The question about Taylor, I don’t have any particular put together thoughts, so Taylor has appeared on those lists and appears on the most prominent institution on general Taylor street which is Touro Infirmary, the biggest hospital in New Orleans in uptown New Orleans and the Touro Infirmary website it is claimed for general Taylor, Zachary Taylor’s son. Its suggested that within memory it had been thought of that way, and Taylor was the last thing to get removed and it only got removed last week. I’ve spent some time thinking about this precise question but I think in this kind of process, given the key charge, named for, is the language of the ordinance. I think speaking for myself, the goal here of actually just getting some of this done and both doing a process that can provide a model in good and bad ways, you can mimic these things and please don’t mimic these things. If you do them in New Orleans or Baton Rouge or anywhere else. I think, in the interest of getting them through, staying closest as possible to language makes sense but I think the comment is absolutely right. If folks think of the place named, just like Leonidas, most people I think it was Leonidas Polk, lots of people writing books thought it was Leonidas Polk, and that is particularly the kind of person we don’t want to be honoring but in the end Leonidas came out.

*Mobley:* From a more pragmatic standpoint, the process of changing a street name normally is a lot less expansive than the process we just undertook. So in the process of saying we will withdraw Leonidas and General Taylor, the fact that there is a constituency for remove them now that has an easier road to get through may see those changes made anyway without having put more things on the Christmas tree that is this process, that might doom it.

*Adams:* To just reiterate this point that Sue makes, one thing we got from people sympathetic to this process, there was an early criticism, “why isn’t Fats Domino on your list?” Fats Domino’s family and his fans have began this process on their own for the street he lived on in the lower 9th ward, Caffin avenue, they have gone to the city council member for that district and they are beginning that process. Its quite an easy process for a large group of people with connection that street. When the first names came out we were dialing back criticism from friends in both direct and on social media, “how could not have Fats Domino on your list?” Actually, Fats is being honored in a different process which is to say that if folks wanted to do this on their own for any of these reasons or something else, it would be relatively easy if you can build that constituency.

*Goldgaber:* There is another question that was seconded, how does the surplus or deficiency of information about a name relate to those names being changed?

*Adams:* The example I gave in Lakeview was complete deductive reasoning, there wasn’t much information. In fact, we were getting challenged. In some cases, it is pretty straight forward. Henry Vignaud was a guy, there were no other famous Vignaud’s in New Orleans, it’s a relatively small street, he also lived up near there, seems pretty straight forward. The Lakeview ones, we tried to get a pattern. What do the names Conrad, Walker, Downs and Mouton have in common? Oh, all were either senators or governors of Louisiana in the 1840’s or 1850’s, there’s something that unites these 4. I think that’s the best you can do when you don’t have a council document or a planning document that says, “today we are honoring Robert E Lee, not with Robert E Lee boulevard but with Lee street.” Lee street in the lower 9th ward is coming down and its right next to Beauregard and that helps us.

*Mobley:* In terms of replacement, that surplus or deficit of information is also a factor. Where possible, as with our Lakeview self emancipating folks, where there hasn’t been a lot of information. And thank you to Freedom on the Move for providing what information there is. Being able to craft a compelling narrative about a moment in someone’s life or a set of actions is a challenge when you’re up against people who the biography is 8 pages of what they achieved, mostly for ill, but still that can’t be balanced. It’s one of the reasons that our narratives were relatively short, to try and equalize some of the weight in the story telling. I thought it was interesting that, I didn’t anticipate that, during the process of turning the report over to the commission, there was a recency bias. I think our panel of experts were heavily inclined to the 19th century and the commission was much more invested in folks from the 20th century. I feel like we lost almost everyone from the 18th and that was sad. Thin Mallow (sp?) we kept. We need that translation and focus as much as the amount of information that there is. Which to molly’s point in the chat, that is why it’s important to share the stories and that the work that, was done by people like molly, is work that we are folding into curriculums and folding into informal way of educating people about our place and our place’s history and our people, and our people’s stories.

*Adams:* To add really quick, to think that some of the students but also the example of Eleanor Pete, the initial research for that, is a name, she appears in 4 scholarly monographs and 1 page mentions all spelled different ways. And that was an undergraduate student who was assigned to gather what she could, she tracked down her birth certificate, a bunch of newspapers that no one had seen. Again, this is a topic that is exploding in historiography research, African American women’s labor activism. There’s the potential that students can absolutely do this kind of research.

*Goldgaber*: There are a lot of questions coming through in the comments, so I’ll allow our speakers to decide because we were scheduled to for 1 hour. I am happy to go to 1:20 PM but I want to be respectful of people’s time. I wanted to invite you also, while you look at those comments, I am a philosopher by training, but what do you think is the ethical significance of what you are doing? What is the philosophical significance of street names? Some might say, “who knows who these people are anyway?” In my class, we are reading about collective memory and it’s links to identify and the preservation of the past has a very important psychological and ethical significance for humans. So I wanted to invite you to zoom out and go big about the significance of this work ethically and philosophically. In addition to the other questions you feel like responding to.

*Mobley:* The length of street signs that the city can produce, the machines setters possess are fairly limited. So giving full names is tricky. I have stressed out our team enough, the stories will live elsewhere, we are setting up History Pin, I would really love to see some “what’s going up” and “what’s coming down” signage that is temporary as things go through city council. I’m not a huge fan of markers as I’m working on a national audit of monuments and I’m wrapping my head around how many markers there across the country. It’s terrible and people don’t read them. I am for all forms of creative representation and recognition in place and hope that people will take that up and do it rather than waiting for the city to do it.

*Adams:* I will try to take the ethical question. I am historian and at one point in my life I was an old school socialist historian, and I don’t know if I’m that anymore but I have a love for it, the really trying to tease out peoples lives part of it. Sue and I have talked about this when we’ve tried to write a little bit about this. Changing a street name to Eleanor Pete or Gaggliano, doesn’t do anything about global warming or the rising sea level, the massive labor exploitation going on across the city and I think, maybe this is kind of pollyannaishness of the historian to say the ways we publically incorporate our narratives of the past and our narratives of the past, present and looking to the future is not preordained. And at times, ranging rom slavery, it took the actions of millions, but it started in many ways with the actions of people who tried to flee their masters and owners before the civil war that heled end that institution. Those things are not preordained. That the mass exploitation of African American women in households in New Orleans could be made through efforts of their own to be made better. The interventions of scientists and legislators can begin to give us a model for ending global warming, I think putting those narratives in our space, our physical space but hopefully in our mental space as much as possible, tells us that things can be different because things were different and changed because of people’s actions.

*Mobley:* More than anything our impulse as panel and as individuals is to tell the stories of everyday people who did extraordinary things, often not by themselves. So much of the way the past is sold to us is about valorized individuals who are unequaled and unequalable. But the changes that matter most are the ones we make together and that’s teaching a generation of people need to know right now because we have a lot of change that needs to happen right now. So the more stories that we tell the more opportunities people have to find themselves as actors and change agents, the more hope I have for the future. And whether that is inscribing them on our streets or changing our texts books or making funny posters that we wheat paste on things, the more stories we tell the more we can see ourselves in those stories.

*Goldgaber:* That was really beautiful. Sue, can you put in the chat, can people still access Paper Monuments? There are some beautiful story telling and art collaborations on paper. I think Thomas Adams has one. Sue just added it to the chat, Papermonuments.org. I want to thank you for taking the time today to share this process with us and the this is an important part to the community engagement that you were talking about. Hopefully, Baton Rouge can initialize a process that is similar but that seems to be difficult. Thank you so much again for joining us today.

END TRANSCRIPTION