

Renaming Campus Buildings: A Step Towards Reparations at the University of Minnesota

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Introduction

Most of the buildings that make up the University of Minnesota campus have been around since the university was founded in 1851. Many of these buildings have remained permanent fixtures on campus and each holds with it a history, and, of course, a name. However, four of these buildings—Coffey Hall, Coffman Memorial Union, Middlebrook Hall, and Nicholson Hall—are named after individuals who held a vision for the University of Minnesota much different from the U we see today. The men whom the buildings are named after were claimed to uphold racist ideals and promote discrimination during their time on campus.

I set out to learn about the history behind these buildings and to explore the current efforts to have them renamed. I also wanted to learn more about individuals who resisted oppression at the university at this time.

Purpose & Methods

My goal was to develop an understanding around why these building names are contested today and to assess if changes are appropriate. My interest in this topic was sparked when I received an email asking me to sign a petition to have Coffman Memorial Union renamed which started my initial search into the university history.

I quickly discovered the *A Campus Divided* exhibit which I used as a primary resource for this research. The goal of *A Campus Divided* was to illuminate the history of the university in ways unseen before. I set out to learn more about the past and evaluate what should be done today in order to atone for past mistakes. I analyzed original documents including letters between administrative staff, newspaper articles, student and faculty essays, and biographies to gather an understanding of what the climate of the university was like at the time and how it affected student life.

Findings

Building History

Lotus Coffman served as president from 1920-1938. During his time he advocated for segregated housing for black students and actively discriminated against black, Jewish, and other minority students.

As the Dean of Student Affairs, Edward Nicholson kept record of students that he considered "dangerous" or "radical" and even reported some to the FBI. He was accused of denying students access to political information and even blocked some student groups from receiving mail. He attempted to control these groups and created obstacles to hinder their success and advancement.

Walter Coffey served first as Dean for the Department of Agriculture (now CFANS) and then as president from 1941-1945. During his time at the University he worked with Coffman to restrict housing for black students. As President he refused to acknowledge protesting student groups and even attempted to restrict other departments and administrators from interacting with groups advocating for civil rights.

William Middlebrook served as comptroller when Coffman was president. He also pushed for segregation for black students, specifically in regards to the proposed integration of the nursing school. He suggested paying black students to live elsewhere off campus.

“What is critical here is to go through the same process as we did of trying to develop a mature, historical consciousness about the human movement through space and time, and note how the particularities of this circumstance in the here now, related to the particularities of the circumstance that our earlier generations were in and what views can you adapt from that,”

-John Wright

Findings Cont.

Significant Individuals

In my research I also discovered the efforts of several individuals who actively fought oppression and protested these discriminatory practices. I researched further into the biographies of these significant people who stood up and fought for inclusion and justice at the university.

John Wright

John Wright attended the University of Minnesota during the 1960s. During his time, he was well-aware of the discriminatory policies and remnants of segregation that still existed on campus and throughout the administration. He was a key organizer of the Morrill Hall takeover—a radical protest that was successful in creating new opportunities and raising awareness and support for black students on campus. As a result, the department of African American studies was created along with the University's Martin Luther King Jr program.

Garland D. Kyle

Garland Kyle was a graduate student who fought for integration of student housing. He created and led campaigns to stop the segregation of student housing—campaigns that would ultimately become critical in permanently dismantling segregated housing that the university created later in the 1940s after the death of Coffman and Middlebrook. He received his PhD from the U and during his time continually advocated for the end of segregated housing and similar practices of discrimination on campus and nationwide later on throughout his career.

Elias P. Lyon

Elias Lyon was Dean of the Medical School in the 1930s and served at the same time as President Coffman. During his time, Lyon supported the integration of student housing, and specifically fought against segregation of the nurses hall despite Coffman and several other associates advising against integration. At a time when most of his colleagues were actively supporting segregation and pressuring him to do the same, Dean Lyon stood his ground and refused to support these policies and practices. He recognized how wrong and damaging these policies were and fought against them.

Current Efforts

When John Wright helped organize the Morrill Hall takeover in 1969 they began with a list of demands. Among those demands was the consideration of Martin Luther King Jr's name for the new library that was just built on the West Bank. While building names may seem insignificant or even trivial, they can carry great weight in that they have the potential to represent much more than what is in the actual building itself. Names remain throughout history and are supposed to serve as a reminder, a memory, or a legacy of that which it is named after.

In October of 2018, a task force was assembled to analyze the names and institutional history of the four buildings in question. After a thorough investigation into the university's past and a thoughtful reflection, the task force announced their recommendation in favor of changing the names. President Kaler relayed the decision to the University at large, but the ultimate decision to remove and/or change the names will fall to the Board of Regents. In his email, Kaler wrote that several Board members requested additional information which should be made available before "further discussion and possible action" in May. The discussion about name changes also provoked conversation about whether the descendants of the owners of the building names should be involved in the decision. As of now, an official decision by the Board of Regents is still pending.

Renaming the buildings condemns the actions of the past and posits the university as a place that values equity and diversity. As the U continues to stride towards inclusion and diversity, it is important to reflect on and acknowledge the past as a means of better informing our future.



References

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