“What’s in a Name?”

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Published October 2022, revised August 2026 | www.legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/case-studies and www.justiceinschools.org

Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

BACKGROUND

This fictional case explores the challenges universities face in confronting issues of memorialization and naming on their campuses. In this case, a committee comprising faculty members and one student at the fictional Thompson College (named for the fictional Thompson family) discusses community disagreement over renaming the college. What responsibilities do universities have to reconsider whom they memorialize? How should they weigh different stakeholder perspectives? How might different approaches to naming promote or impede belonging on campus?

As the leaves began to turn and campus bustled with students returning for the fall semester, Provost Alex Johnson entered the conference room, greeting his colleagues in his typical booming voice, “Welcome back everyone! What could be better than our first committee meeting of the year?”

As his colleagues chuckled, Provost Johnson took a more serious tone, “But seriously, I’m excited we’re moving into the implementation phase. The planning for next month’s renaming ceremony is going well, too. You’ll be pleased—we have a gospel choir performing!”

Professor of Music Amy Fitzgerald's eyebrows lifted. "That's great," she said. "But are you really thinking we're just going ahead with the same plans we laid down in May?"

Provost Johnson paused. "Why not? Dean Mitchell has been working all summer with students and staff to orchestrate the renaming of Thompson Hall; they're doing an amazing job."

Dean of Students Samantha Mitchell interjected enthusiastically, "You've got to see the plaque that one of the Art Department alums designed, Professor Fitzgerald! It's such a beautiful integration of Thompson College's original 1742 shield with iconography representing new growth and change; it'll take your breath away. Oh, and I can't wait to introduce you to our latest hire for community and belonging! She's really been doing great work with the student speakers for the ceremony."

"But what about this summer's protests, and all the posters I saw on my way from the parking lot, and tomorrow's march?" Professor Fitzgerald questioned. "Maybe it's just my jet lag, but frankly it didn't occur to me that we would just keep moving ahead implementing the report without revisiting our recommendations in light of everything that's happened. Things have changed. What felt bold in May—like renaming Thompson Hall—feels, I don't know, maybe too tentative now. Don't we need to talk about this?"

It had been a fraught summer at Thompson College, a small liberal arts college that was previously best known for an overabundance of used bookstores in town and a fierce ultimate frisbee team. The previous year, students in a senior historiography seminar had mounted a powerful public exhibition about the Thompson family's history of slave ownership and multigenerational investment in the slave trade. One of the most shocking exhibits was a series of excerpts from one of the Thompson brothers' diaries from the 1830s that trafficked in explicitly racist tropes; although the language wasn't unusual for the time, many Thompson College students, staff, and faculty alike seized on the excerpts as demonstrating the college's history of white supremacy and continued practices of racial exclusion.

The ensuing furor led the college president to establish Thompson's Committee on Historical Memory, headed by Provost Johnson, which had released a report in May recommending renaming Thompson Hall, the main administration building, and increasing funding for community and belonging initiatives. But instead of the accolades that many on the committee were expecting, they found themselves excoriated by a number of student groups advocating for further action. There were many proposals being discussed in the student newspaper and in rallies and teach-ins across campus, from establishing an ethnic studies major[1] to creating a reparations fund.

[1] University and college students have often advocated for ethnic studies programs with inspiration from the SF State College Strike in 1968 and 1969, which led to the creation of the first College of Ethnic Studies in the nation. See more here: https://ethnicstudies.sfsu.edu/history.

For a while, it wasn't clear if any ideas would gain traction. But recently, a core group of students and alumni activists had begun coalescing around the goal of erasing the Thompson name from campus—not just the administration building, but the college itself.[2]

The other committee members settled into their seats, bracing themselves for a revival of previous debates. Professor of Chemistry Matthew Lewis's patience was already dwindling. "Come on, Professor Fitzgerald," he sighed. "You're not taking a couple dozen student radicals seriously, are you? Our committee went through a thorough process to develop our recommendations, and we should be proud that we're at the implementation stage now. Our recommendations were bold, *and* they are reasonable. Unlike the nonsense students are spouting now. Renaming Thompson College? You've got to be kidding me."

"The students aren't kidding," she replied dryly.

Professor Lewis replied, clearly annoyed, "I know—that's the problem. They're moving the goal posts. Give an inch and they take a mile!"

Marcus Williams, a senior at the college and leader of several campus organizations, spoke up. "I'm not sure it's about goal post moving, Professor Lewis," he said cautiously, acutely aware of his status as the only student member of the committee. "They're using our own language from the report, pointing out that if we believe in community, belonging, and truth, then those values should apply to the campus as a whole, not just to the name of one administration building. That kinda makes sense to me. Shouldn't we be consistent?"

Professor Lewis retorted firmly, "It's consistent to rename the building, not to erase history. Do you really think we should remove every hint of the Thompson family? They built the place! Without their leadership, the students wouldn't even have a campus to protest about—nor would we have the resources to support generous financial aid packages and all the other initiatives they favor. Let's be consistent in recognizing who we owe our existence to."

As Professor Lewis dug into his position, Provost Johnson found himself in agreement. "You're right. Thompson College has a long and storied history—and both the college and the family are about way more than a few diary excerpts that frankly expressed what a lot of white people

[2]This case explores a number of examples of American universities grappling with naming choices, but these questions also resonate around the globe. In 2021, for example, Ryerson University in Canada became Toronto Metropolitan University, cutting ties with namesake Egerton Ryerson, who played a role in developing the government's residential schools for Indigenous children. See: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ryerson-university-name-change-1.6154716.
In 2023, Trinity College Dublin decided to change the name of its central library after evidence emerged that its namesake, the 18th-century philosopher George Berkeley, was an enslaver. Further, there were advocates for renaming the city of Berkeley in California, but changing the name of the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) was not significantly considered, according to one university official. See: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/08/world/europe/george-berkeley-trinity-college-dublin.html, https://www.berkeleyside.org/2022/01/07/opinion-berkeley-is-named-after-a-slaveholder-its-time-to-rename-the-city.

thought at the time. I'm glad we're renaming Thompson Hall, but I can't conceive of renaming the college. Look at Washington and Lee. Their board opted not to remove the Confederate general's name, and Lee was far worse than the Thompsons!"[3]

"Really?" Professor Fitzgerald jumped in. "Is that our defense now, that the Thompsons weren't as bad as Confederate war generals?"

"And who's to say Washington and Lee won't reconsider down the road?" Dean Mitchell added. "As you know, Yale's renaming committee decided not to change the name of Calhoun College despite John C. Calhoun's staunch defense of slavery, but then less than a year later, the university reversed course and changed it after all.[4] And Princeton renamed their Woodrow Wilson Public Policy School, even though they said for years that renaming was inappropriate given Wilson's stature as a US and Princeton president. Frankly, Wilson still has a lot more going for him than the Thompsons do—but Princeton finally acknowledged that his racism and commitment to resegregating the federal government didn't deserve to be honored."[5]

Provost Johnson became uncomfortable with the turn the conversation was taking. While he knew there was plenty of work to be done to improve the campus climate and increase belonging, he thought these naming issues had been settled in the spring.

"You're talking about a campus dorm and a policy school, not the name of the university, though."

"That's true, Provost Johnson," Marcus said slowly. "But UC's Hastings College of Law is now named UC College of the Law given Serranus Hastings's policies of exterminating Native Americans,[6] and William Peace University has considered selecting a new namesake, too.[7] It's not unheard of."

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[3] In 2021, Washington and Lee University opted to retain the name of Confederate general Robert E. Lee after months of review. See: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/04/us/washington-lee-university-names.html.

[4] For more about the renaming of Calhoun College (named for pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun) at Yale, see: https://time.com/4668029/yale-renames-calhoun-college/, https://yaledailynews.com/articles/calhoun-college-renamed.

[5] To learn more about the renaming of Wilson College (a residential college at Princeton) and Woodrow Wilson Public Policy School, see https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53207649, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/10/us/mellody-hobson-woodrow-wilson-princeton.html, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/27/i-opposed-taking-woodrow-wilsons-name-off-our-school-heres-why-i-changed-my-mind/?_pml=1.

[6] On January 1, 2023, UC Hastings changed its name to the University of California College of the Law, San Francisco (UC Law SF). The impetus for the change was newly discovered evidence that Serranus Hastings was involved in the killing and harm of the Indigenous populations of the Round Valley Tribes and Yuki People in Northern California. See: https://www.uclawsf.edu/new-name/.

[7] William Peace University removed a statue of its founder from campus in 2022 after evidence emerged that he was an enslaver. Although renaming the college has been discussed, the college has retained its name as of the writing of this case in 2026. See more here: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/25/william-peace-u-confronts-history-william-peace.

Professor Lewis replied, “Sure, but this isn’t a bandwagon we need to jump on. The Thompsons were no different from many wealthy white families of their day. They did a lot of good—including setting up our college for nearly 300 years of academic excellence and success.”

“Wait, now we’re *celebrating* the Thompsons?” Professor Fitzgerald said, exasperated. “I thought we had gotten past that when we decided to rename Thompson Hall.”

“No, but renaming a building is different from erasing their history,” Professor Lewis answered. “Renaming the administration building is an important symbol of our college’s rejection of slavery and racism. But we can’t reject our whole history.”

Marcus interjected, “That’s what a lot of students see as the problem. That it’s just symbolic. The college is *performing* contrition, but we’re not actually doing the work of making real, concrete change.”

“You say ‘a lot of students,’ but I’m not convinced it’s actually so many,” Provost Johnson countered. “What do you see from the student dean’s office, Dean Mitchell?”

“Student reaction has been mixed,” she replied. “Some students are happy with the committee’s recommendations, some aren’t, and then there are a good number who are ambivalent or just unengaged.”

“Many students are disengaged, Dean Mitchell,” Marcus affirmed, “and, of course, everyone has their own perspective, but I’d say students and alumni of color are pretty unified in their opposition to the report.”

“That’s true, Marcus. The Black Student Alliance and #TCAlumsRiseUp have been quite vocal about the psychological impact of building names and images that highlight individuals who enslaved people and kept all non-white people—and women!—from studying here.[8] They make a pretty clear case that they want to go to class without being constantly reminded that when this place was built, it wasn’t meant for students who looked like them.”[9]

[8] The idea of renaming Wilson College at Princeton was raised by a student group named the Black Justice League in 2015, when they held a sit-in protest in November. See: https://planetprinceton.com/2015/11/18/black-justice-from-buildings/.

[9] To read some scientific theories about the relationship between monuments and self-image, see: Castelloe, M. S. (2022, March 14). Confederate monuments and self-image. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/202203/confederate-monuments-and-self-image. In his reflection about the de-naming of a building at UC Berkeley that used to be named after the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, Andrew Shanken writes about how monuments may cause psychosocial stressors. See: Shanken, A. M. (2025). Unnaming buildings. *Memory Studies, 18*(1), 326-327. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241247268.

Provost Johnson grew confused, "But isn't that what next month's ceremony is about? That's what you've been telling me in our meetings, Dean Mitchell: that the ceremony will show we're committed to changing the narrative."

"Changing the narrative isn't changing the institution, Provost Johnson," Marcus asserted. "Dean Mitchell has been great, but students are getting frustrated that the committee seems to be treating its work as an end point rather than a beginning. And since the budget recommendations were presented in a five-year plan, none of us will even see the results of the changes during our time here. Like, we've said a lot of words, but words aren't change."

Professor Fitzgerald tempered her earlier intensity, "I wouldn't say that, Marcus. Words have tremendous power—that's why the diary was so explosive, right? And that's especially true in an institution like ours; what is *more* powerful in higher education than the words we write and stories we tell?"

"This is exactly why we're renaming the administration building!" Provost Johnson's confusion turned to irritation. "That *is* a concrete action that speaks to what we value as a community and want to honor."

Marcus replied, calmly but resolutely, "Sure, but if we're not going to consider renaming the college, then a lot of people will say it's proof that this was all just for show."

"If we do consider renaming the college, then a lot of our alums will say it's proof we've lost our moorings," Professor Lewis interrupted. He shuffled through his briefcase and pulled out a recent letter to the *Thompson Daily News* campus paper from the leader of a group calling itself the Campaign against a Lost Legacy. "Nobody even knew or cared about what the Thompson name meant before last year—other than that they felt pride in being Thompson College graduates. That's what we stand for: academic excellence, personal integrity, and a spirit of civic responsibility. I don't see how a few diary entries from 200 years ago change that. Here, listen to this article!"[10]

Professor Lewis read the letter to the editor aloud:

[10] Alumni groups are often important constituents of colleges and universities because of their affective relationships with their alma maters, and these groups often stay involved in campus climates. One such group was the Jefferson Council based at the University of Virginia. In 2024, they criticized campus tours conducted by student volunteers that focused on the work done by enslaved people to build the university. This example begs the question: How should schools celebrate the accomplishments of founders like Thomas Jefferson while reckoning with their complicated legacies? See more here: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/29/us/university-of-virginia-tours-slavery.html.

"Thompson College is about a legacy of excellence, not the current obsessions of students and faculty. We didn't become one of the premier liberal arts colleges in the nation by bending over backwards to accommodate every passing intellectual and political fad. A Thompson education means rigor, answering the call for service, and leading instead of following. That's Thompson's long-term value proposition, and people know it as Thompson, not as Random College U. Students, you say you want to feel included? Just wait and see how doors will open when you apply for jobs with Thompson College on your resume. Look around your dorms and remember that we, the alumni, paid for your community rooms and house teas and summer internships. That's what belonging looks like—and it won't last if Thompson College loses its identity. Alumni feel connected to this place, these names. Their stories are all situated in buildings that you want to change the names of. Sure, there is some unsavory history, but those people are long gone and it's not like most people even know who they are at this point. Be careful what you wish for."

Professor Lewis set the newspaper down and looked around the table at his colleagues. "I don't think the students have thought through what they'd be giving up if Thompson changed its name," he declared. "They may not realize it now, but brand recognition matters—and it lasts a lot longer than their four years on campus."

"Yes," agreed Provost Johnson. "And faculty recruitment and retention will be harder, too."

After a few moments of silence, Professor Fitzgerald remarked, "I'm wondering if maybe we shouldn't change Thompson's name after all, but for reasons different from yours, Professor Lewis and Provost Johnson. I actually think there's potential for that path to be bolder."

The others looked puzzled.

Professor Fitzgerald continued, "Removing Thompson's name gives us a pass—or, at least, it gives future faculty and students a pass—from actually confronting our history. The students are right that our institution's actions and namesakes have played a role in perpetuating societal injustices for generations. And the Campaign against a Lost Legacy is right that alumni and students have created their own associations with these names and symbols.[11] So, let's embrace those other narratives. Let's reconstruct those connections and honor the people who have made the school what it is today, rather than just those who gave the initial seed funding."

Marcus shook his head, frustrated. "With all due respect, as a campus, we've committed ourselves to creating a more inclusive community. How does that square with keeping slaveholders' names on our college? Shouldn't our principles be consistent?"

[11] Stanford's "Proposed Principles and Procedures for Renaming Buildings and Other Features at Stanford University" grapples with many of these same issues. See: https://equity.stanford.edu/principles-and-procedures-renaming-buildings-and-other-features-stanford-university.

“Principles are important,” Dean Mitchell affirmed. “To be frank, I’m not sure what ours are anymore.”

Provost Johnson sighed, contemplating next directions for the meeting that had devolved before his eyes. He pondered how to proceed.

“Alright, it seems we’re still divided and aren’t quite sure what we as a committee are trying to accomplish. What does it mean to meaningfully disavow the Thompson family? We wouldn’t be sitting in this room without them, but should we put changing our college’s name on the table as a possible course of action? What are the principles that should drive our decisions moving forward?”

To cite this case study:

Tucker Mehta, C., Jonathan, O. & Levinson, M. (2026). What’s in a Name? *Justice in Schools*. https://www.justiceinschools.org/whats-in-a-name and *Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Initiative*. https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies/.

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