

In support of Warrant Article 23, the renaming of the Edward Devotion School
Submitted by Susan Wolf Ditkoff, for the School Committee
May 29, 2018

Thank you Mr. Moderator. Tonight, we have an opportunity – not only to talk about history, but to be part of history. The comments we make at these microphones will be studied by future generations of scholars interested in how we, in our day, chose to tackle the difficult legacy of slavery in Brookline.

This chapter in our history begins with the work of Hidden Brookline, the Brookline Historical Society, and dedicated Petitioners Deborah Brown and Anne Greenwald. They embody the famous challenge attributed to John Maynard Keynes: “When information changes, I alter my conclusions. What, sir, do you do?”

As the history of slavery in Brookline has come into focus, the School Committee has considered three aspects of renaming: the Process, the Criteria, and the Merits.

First, Process. Grappling seriously with our history is broader than any one individual, and any one building. Therefore, the School Committee’s first step was to set up an Ad Hoc Task Force, with careful thought about a diverse group of members, like Dr. Barbara Brown, Misti Jaynes, Malcom Cawthorne, Pam Roberts, Mark Gray, Ken Liss, John Dempsey, Dr. Lloyd Gellineau, and others, to investigate the names of all of our school spaces. Not just Devotion. And while the Task Force has voted to support this Warrant Article, their original mandate continues: to investigate all of our school names.

Financially, the School Committee also realized early on that tens of thousands of dollars were about to be spent on new Edward Devotion signage—on the basketball court, the soccer field, and so forth. So we planned ahead, and requested that those signs be put on hold. As a result, no big-ticket cost items will need “reversing” if this Warrant Article is successful.

At that point, the public hearings began. All in, this issue has been discussed at more than 15 public meetings with input from roughly 100 students, alumni, parents, teachers, residents, historians, and others.

Second, Criteria. We have been guided by the Naming Guidelines both of Town Meeting and the School Committee. The bar was not, and is not, a “perfect” honoree. We looked for balance. We sought out and discussed evidence about whether the contributions of Edward Devotion net-net outweighed the fact that he held a fellow human being in slavery. We also weighed the historical context in which Edward Devotion lived.

The School Committee asserts that naming a school merits a higher standard than naming other public spaces, a street for example, and here’s why. Adults can freely choose to live on a street, or not. But we require our children to attend school. We ask them to assume the identity of the namesake into their very own identity. We ask a 5 year old child to say: I am a proud student of the Edward Devotion School. We ask them to root for Devotion on the soccer field, and shout ‘Devo Pride!’ at Math League tournaments. This isn’t just about a school’s name – we’re talking about the core of a child’s identity. White children, children of color. So a higher standard is needed.

Finally, to the Merits. The School Committee believes that — knowing what we know now — we have a singular opportunity to make a decision on whether this individual, Edward Devotion, continues to be worthy of our Town's highest honor — having his name on one of our schools. Edward Devotion was surely a wealthy man, responsible for donating land for educational purposes. And while we acknowledge that that was admirable, it was also noted that that wealth was derived in part from his holding another person in slavery.

The School Committee also believes that while this Warrant Article is an important step, it is just one part of a broader approach to combating racism. To that end, let me share just a couple of highlights from Brookline's approach to teaching slavery — which we do every year from grades 3-8. In 3rd grade we teach about slavery, emancipation, and abolition here in Brookline. In middle grades: the impact of slavery on Early American history from the founding of the English Colonies to the 3/5ths and Slave Trade debates at the Constitutional Convention. This strand culminates in our study of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement. We are proud that this multi-year curriculum scope and sequence is an integral part of K-8 social studies in Brookline, led by our talented educators, and in partnership with outside groups like Hidden Brookline, Facing History, and others.

In parallel, I'm also proud that racial diversity among our District's educational leadership is at an all-time high — in K-8 alone, we have 3 principals of color and 4 vice principals of color. This is historic. And in the Override, the School Committee advocated for, and the Town generously supported, new funds dedicated to racial equity work.

No single action will end racism in our town or our country. And regardless of this vote, Edward Devotion's name will not be erased from history. It will live on the Edward Devotion House in front of the school, and on artifacts throughout the building. But this Warrant Article is one very important step — it is not only symbolic, it is real — in dismantling structural barriers to racial equity in our town. We are happy to answer questions about our plans to ensure a robust "Renaming" process this fall with students, alumni, families, and residents.

If you'll permit me to conclude on a personal note, there are uncomfortable aspects of what it means to confront a change like this. I was trained as an anthropological linguist. 20 years later, my university just went through a widely-publicized renaming process for one of its colleges. My former colleagues were asked to weigh in on the renaming, as anthropologists, ethnographers, and linguists. Their professional conclusion? Names and words shape our thoughts just as much as thought shapes words. Names especially matter in shaping children's minds.

Like many of you, I learned things as a child that I've had to unlearn as an adult. For example, the myth of assimilation — the melting pot — masks important truths about how we all got to America, and how different groups have experienced the American Dream. In the interests of being a good American and building a real, authentic diverse community, therefore, I've had to unlearn a lot of false narratives. Unlearning and unnamings has been a humbling and important process for me, and a necessary one. One we are now experiencing here together, tonight.

On behalf of the School Committee, I thank you for your attention to this important decision. We urge your support for favorable action on Warrant Article 23. Thank you.