



## OPINION

# History shouldn't be erased, but doesn't need to be celebrated: Rolfe

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The Hasbrouck Dining Hall at SUNY New Paltz, photographed Sept. 27, 2017. Several buildings at the college are named for families of early settlers of New Paltz who were slaveowners. School officials are examining the possibility of removing these names. (Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

The recent [4-3 vote by the SUNY New Paltz College Council to replace the names of slave-owning Huguenot settlers on six campus buildings](#) ([/story/news/local/2019/02/21/suny-new-paltz-council-votes-rename-huguenot-buildings/2945174002/](#)) got me to chewing on a question that's as tough as cheap steak:

At what point is the good that a person has done discounted or negated by the bad?

None of us are without sin, and some sins are worse than others, but we all have our own levels of acceptance and forgiveness. Many folks resent the Governor Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge being renamed for Gov. Mario Cuomo because they dislike Cuomo's political legacy. The bridge kerfuffle illustrates the emotion a name can evoke when it is placed on a public structure where it is usually intended and interpreted as an honor.

American history, however glorious, has a dark side. Thomas Jefferson is a particularly thorny example. A true titan of American history, he was a Founding Father, President, Secretary of State, and much more. That Jefferson owned slaves and, in his "Notes on the State of Virginia," voiced his suspicions about the natural inferiority of black humans, is well known.

Should Jefferson be removed from Mount Rushmore or our currency? I don't think so, but I can certainly understand the case for feeling less than totally reverential of the man. If your ancestors had been denied freedom by others who profited from their unpaid labor, you'd probably look at him more dimly, especially when you are still encountering the mindset behind those evil deeds.

Jefferson didn't fully honor it but he gave America a lofty ideal to strive for when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...."

The abolishment of slavery and legal segregation should be celebrated, and so should the good that Jefferson did in establishing a great nation. The New Paltz families in question — Hasbrouck, Crispell, Deyo, DuBois, Bevier and Lefevre — founded the town and are cited by the college as having prominent white and black ancestors who contributed to educational opportunities in the area. The students' objections to the slavery link are not frivolous and the college's response is not an Orwellian attempt to revise history.

There are differences between honoring history, acknowledging it, and erasing it. While many people see political correctness running amok in New Paltz, it's easy to insist that others "just get over" a grievance like slavery and institutional racism. "Never forget!" is a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but how many Americans take it lightly when they're told to just get over it? The human heart can't be ordered to forgive, heal or love. Those things happen in the heart's own time.

Controversial historical figures like slave owners and Confederate leaders are probably best consigned to historical museums and designated parks. If SUNY's Board of Trustees approves the change, the family names in question will be moved to a space showcasing the college's history while the buildings are renamed according to suggestions by students, alumni, faculty, staff and community members, including descendants of the Huguenots.

I can't come up with a hard and fast answer to my question at the top. All I know is that history, however uncomfortable, should never be erased. Perhaps it just needs a proper place from time to time. The SUNY New Paltz matter feels like one of those times.

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