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Section Three: Illustrative Case Studies

This is the third section of "Report on SFUSD School Renaming" by Families For San Francisco.

Ten case studies of the Committee's review process are presented. (This is not meant to be an exhaustive list; the number ten is chosen simply because it is a round number.) Historical figures are considered in the order in which the Committee reviewed them.

#1 and #2; Abraham Lincoln High School and George Washington High School

[[August 12, 00:55:08](#) and [00:59:50](#) respectively]

There was effectively no discussion of Lincoln and Washington. The consideration of Abraham Lincoln took five seconds, and the consideration of George Washington took twelve seconds, basically the length of time it took in each case to state the name and record the Committee's assent that the school in question should be renamed.

#3; Lowell High School [[August 12, 1:02:30](#)]

The entirety of the research done on James Russell Lowell cited in the [Google Sheet](#) is a copy and paste of portions of the first paragraph of the "Beliefs" section of Lowell's Wikipedia page. The Committee member who copy/pasted the Wikipedia excerpt asserted that Lowell met criteria for renaming, but another Committee member indicated an inability to verify this via research and questioned why Lowell should be removed. The first Committee member then read the excerpted text verbatim, with one crucial, erroneous ad hoc comment added. The text that was read indicated that although Lowell was a lifelong abolitionist who had fought for the rights of African-Americans, Lowell's commitment to the anti-slavery cause wavered over the years, and he sometimes espoused views regarding the inferiority of Blacks.

The erroneous ad hoc comment that was inserted into the reading of the Wikipedia copy and paste was this: "Therefore, he [i.e. Lowell] did not want Black people to vote." [[1:03:45](#)] There was no factual source cited for this comment. According to Chapter 11 of Martin Duberman's biography on James Russell Lowell, in fact Lowell advocated strongly for the rights of Blacks to vote. Quoting from paragraph four of Chapter 11: "Making the freedman a landholder would not be enough to protect him. He had to be made a voter as well. At a time when even Thaddeus Stevens was hesitant, Lowell unequivocally advocated giving the ballot to the recently freed slaves."



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There was no further discussion of James Russell Lowell once the excerpted Wikipedia text was read, at which point the Committee decided to recommend Lowell High School for renaming. It is interesting to consider this case in light of the Committee Chair's dismissal of the value of consulting historians, especially given that James Russell Lowell was both a very well respected writer and also (as noted by the same Wikipedia entry referenced above) a political activist on the side of abolitionism, worker rights, and opposition of capital punishment – all of which are presumably political views the Committee would view favorably.

#4; James Lick Middle School [[August 12, 1:12:28](#)]

By this time, the Committee had settled into the process of the Committee Chair beginning by asking the Committee member who created the [Google Sheet](#) whether the named person met criteria. The answer given was yes, because James Lick financed the racist Early Pioneers statue that was removed in 2018 after sustained protests. The only source cited is an [SF Curbed](#) article published August 22, 2017. The only mention of James Lick in that article is the following sentence: “San Francisco sculptor Frank Happersberger completed the piece in 1894, originally installed at the old City Hall building and financed posthumously by prototypical kooky Bay Area business tycoon James Lick.” [Linked reference preserved from the original] The word “posthumously” appears to have been overlooked by the Committee member: James Lick died in 1876, and the statue was financed by his estate.

A five and a half minute discussion ensued. At no point was the question of whether James Lick actually had any personal involvement with the statue considered, and it appears none of the participants realized that the statue was financed posthumously by his estate. Instead, the discussion focused on whether the financing of this statue would qualify for removal according to their Guiding Principles. The Committee Chair appeared hesitant to count this as an infraction of the Guiding Principles, and drew a distinction between making or directing the specific content of the art, versus merely financing the creation of art with the general purpose of celebrating California.

Another Committee member, who is Native American, interjected, “I want to talk about how horrible that statue was.” The Committee Chair began to respond, “Yeah, I know. But the statue is now gone,” but realized he was talking over the Committee member and said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” The Committee member then continued:

So you would pay for that statue, and glorify the subjugation of the Native People of California, obviously this person must have been racist to have wanted to celebrate – and [in the statue] to have the priest up there, and then have the Native Person below – so it’s obviously celebrating violence and genocide against the Indigenous People of California. And so, it’s clearly racist. And



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so he definitely meets the criteria that we have for removing his name from the school.

The Committee Chair said, “Okay. Based on what [this Committee member] has shared, any other blocking concerns? [A “blocking concern” would prevent James Lick’s name from being recommended for removal.] After several seconds of silence, the Committee member who spoke passionately about the racism of the statue says, “Next!” The Chair said, “Okay, so I don’t see any blocking concerns, so I’m just going to leave it as a Yes and we’re going to keep moving. And again, if anyone out there researches, you know – even though if it meets criteria, it meets criteria. So we’re saying that – so, can you identify the criteria that it meets? Just so we can be clear for the public?” The Committee member responded, “Racism and genocide against the Indigenous People of California. And it [the statue] celebrates the subjugation of the Native People of California and it celebrates the theft of the native land of California and it definitely meets criteria.” The Committee Chair responded, “No, not the statue, the person.” The Committee member said, “The person paid for it, you know, that’s offensive, they are promoting and celebrating... I mean, that statue has always been extremely painful.” The Committee Chair interjected, “I understand. Okay, all right, great, and okay, so, we’re moving on. Thank you for restating that for the public.”

This case study illustrates three things. First, no effort was made to understand James Lick as a person: the effort focused simply on looking for that “one thing” that could require a name change. Second, the research was superficial and erroneous, and the Committee failed to check even the most basic facts such as when James Lick died relative to the creation of the statue. Third, the decision process appears to have been strongly influenced by the feelings of one person regarding the racist Early Pioneers statue.

#5; Roosevelt Middle School [August 12, 1:20:40]

This school is named for Theodore Roosevelt. Apparently there had been some confusion before the meeting which president the school’s name referenced, and although the [Google Sheet](#) does have an entry for Theodore Roosevelt, it primarily references Franklin Roosevelt. The first minute of the discussion was spent clarifying and confirming that the school is in fact named after Theodore Roosevelt.

The entire [Google Sheet](#) entry for Theodore Roosevelt reads, “Theodore Roosevelt – opposed civil rights and suffrage for Black folks.” No source is cited or link provided to substantiate this statement. The statement was read as the justification for recommending his name for removal; no additional information or historical context was provided, and no sources were cited. “Good,” one Committee member says, “as long as it’s Teddy.” There was general laughter.



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The Committee Chair then said, “Any blocking concerns around...?” Another Committee Member raised a hand. “Only if you have a blocking concern,” says the Chair. “Any blocking concerns around Roosevelt? We don’t need the list of everything they’ve done, we just need one criteria to be on the list.” There were no blocking concerns, and Roosevelt Middle School was placed on the list of schools to be renamed.

This appears to have been an extremely superficial consideration of a highly consequential President who is generally well regarded today. The entire discussion took less than two minutes, most of which was spent confirming the school was named for Theodore and not Franklin Roosevelt.

#6; Paul Revere K-8 [[August 26, 00:09:40](#)]: The [Google Sheet](#) entry for Paul Revere reads, “Paul Revere served as commander of land artillery in the disastrous Penobscot Expedition of 1779, this is directly connected to the colonization of the Penobscott.” The source cited is a [History.com article](#) titled “10 Things You May Not Know About Paul Revere.” Item number eight appears to be the relevant portion and it reads:

Four years after his midnight ride, Paul Revere served as commander of land artillery in the disastrous Penobscott Expedition of 1779. In June of that year, British forces began establishing a fort in what is now Castine, Maine. Over the next few weeks, hundreds of American soldiers converged on the outpost by land and sea. Although the outnumbered British were initially prepared to surrender, the Americans failed to attack in time, and by August enough British reinforcements had arrived to force an American retreat. Charged with cowardice and insubordination, Revere was court-martialed and dismissed from the militia. (He was acquitted in 1782, but his reputation remained tarnished.)

There is no connection drawn in this citation between the Penobscott Expedition of 1779 – which was a military battle named after the Penobscott Bay, where it took place – and the colonization of the Penobscott. Nevertheless, Paul Revere K-8 was recommended for renaming. In order to provide context for how this decision was made, the discussion of Paul Revere, which took slightly more than seven and a half minutes, is summarized in detail below.

DETAILED SUMMARY: The Committee Member who prepared the Google Sheet proposed Yes and read what was originally written in the spreadsheet about Paul Revere being a settler of colonial history, which includes illegally stealing native lands. This original entry did not contain any reference to the Penobscott; the Committee member appears initially to have concluded Paul Revere was a colonizer on a more general basis. The Committee Chair



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said that according to his research, so far as he knows, Paul Revere did not participate in the theft of native lands. “He was, like, a silversmith. He did not participate in the taking of lands. He was, like, a merchant-type person. He wasn’t there at the beginning at the start of any of that, he wasn’t involved in the treaties or breaking of treaties, or going out and breaking [sic] any people. His claim to fame, which wasn’t even most of his work, was to say that we were being invaded by the British.”

The Committee member tried again: “It’s not more about him, personally, but more about the whole storyline. Like – ‘cause like, how you said...” The Committee Chair interrupted: “I understand. But our criteria is not storyline. Our criteria are what did he do as an individual to contribute to, uh, this madness that we, that we, that we’ve been dealing with. And so, through oppression, genocide, our guiding principles.” He pauses a moment and then said, “If it helps for us to review, maybe, if it helps for us to review our guiding principles, so that everybody – and also for the public, so they can know what those are.”

After about a minute the Guiding Principles appeared on the shared screen, but then there were more technical difficulties and it went away. Over a minute and a half passed while they waited for the Guiding Principles to appear again on the screen. Then the Committee member who prepared the original entry on Paul Revere spoke.

“Um, I just found something right now. Paul Revere was actually commander of the artillery against the – with the Penobscot – what they call expedition.” Here the member made air quotes. “Which is basically when, one of – what they called colonizing – they basically say, like take over land – of the Penobscot people. I can share the link right now.”

“Okay,” said the Committee Chair, “please share that link.” While the Committee member was doing this, the Chair said, “Okay, let’s look at our Guiding Principles.” The Chair read them verbatim from the shared screen. The Chair waited a few seconds after finishing, and then asked to switch back to the list of school names.

“So, how, uh...” the Committee Chair began to ask, when the Committee member who was speaking earlier cut him off to answer. “Okay, yeah, so he was directly connected to the colonization of the Penobscot Nation.” The Chair responded, “Okay. Can you share that link?” They could not figure out how to put it in chat, so it was put in the Google Sheet research document.

“I did a lot of research,” said the Chair, “and I did not come across anything like that.”



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“I found it on History.com, which is pretty credible,” said the Committee member.

“Okay,” said the Chair. Then he asked, “Any blocking concerns around that?” After a few seconds, another Committee member asked, “Can you clarify a little bit the connection between a military campaign and the colonization? I mean, I can see it but could you talk a little more about that?” Before a response was provided, this member continued: “So we have Scott and Lawton [names of military figures that had been previously considered] and Paul Revere, who were out on military campaigns against a variety of Native American tribes, or the Philippines.” There is a pause, and then the Committee Chair cut in: “That would be sufficient in and of itself, because they are fighting for [sic] people who are fighting for self-determination on their own land.”

“But is that one of our principles?” asked the member. “What principle is that?”

“Under colonization. Colonization is taking of indigenous lands,” responded the Committee Chair. The Committee member then gave two thumbs up indicating satisfaction with the explanation. The Chair then turned to the first member, who had originally argued for putting Paul Revere’s name on the list: “I just didn’t understand. He was part of a unit that went in and basically cleared land, and cleared people off that land?”

The Committee member nodded. “Specifically with the Penobscots.”

“Okay. the Penobscot group?”

“Penobscot Nation. Native Americans. They still exist; they’re, um, mainly in the state of Maine.” This Committee member then continued by sharing an interesting fact about how the first person of color in major league baseball was Penobscot Indian. “Oh, cool,” said the Chair. “Okay, so back to our doc [i.e. list of school names], which I need to share again.” When the document came back up up, Paul Revere K-8 was marked a Yes for renaming.

#7; Diane Feinstein Elementary [[August 26, 00:40:09](#) and then again [September 23, 00:25:00](#)]: This was considered twice. The first discussion took slightly longer than two minutes. The Committee member who prepared the [Google Sheet](#) indicated that Diane Feinstein’s name should be placed on the renaming list because of her involvement in the eviction of tenants from the International Hotel. (The [Google Sheet](#) provides this link as a source, although there is no relevant content at the linked page at this time: https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Mayor_Dianne_Feinstein.) After a brief discussion, the Committee Chair indicated that overseeing a lawful eviction does not meet the criteria for renaming.



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“Will you put a question mark then?” asked the member. The previous school, El Dorado Elementary, had gotten a question mark because even though the Committee had previously decided any given name should be marked No unless they decided at the time to mark it yes, in the case of El Dorado the Committee decided it needed to gather some additional information. The Committee member who argued for renaming Feinstein Elementary wanted to go back over Feinstein’s history to see whether another basis could be used to justify renaming. “Sure,” said the Committee Chair, “doesn’t hurt.” And so Feinstein’s name was marked for reconsideration at a later time.

Diane Feinstein was recently re-elected Senator in 2018, and although she faced a strong challenge from Kevin DeLeon, she received over 64% of the vote in San Francisco. Given this recent showing of strong positive support from San Francisco, it is not clear what basis the Committee had to give special scrutiny to Feinstein’s name.

The second discussion lasted eleven minutes and is summarized in detail below. After the detailed summary, some additional context and information is provided.

DETAILED SUMMARY: The same Committee member as before took the lead and referenced [this article](#) in the San Francisco Bay View, a National Black Newspaper (per the masthead) titled: *It’s true: As San Francisco mayor, Dianne Feinstein did repeatedly fly a Confederate flag in front of City Hall*. The member said it’s “kind of obvious” from just this one example that Dianne Feinstein meets criteria for Yes.

The Committee Chair asked whether there are any blocking concerns. Another Committee member said while it’s not a blocking concern, it should be noted that the San Francisco Bay View reference is not an article, but is instead a letter to the editor. The Chair said okay, that’s important, a letter is not news. The member noted that the letter gives references that claim the story was in the San Francisco Chronicle, although that member hadn’t personally checked those references. The Chair asked the member who first brought up the San Francisco Bay View whether there is any other research. The member said sorry to have referred to it as an “article” but does everyone see there’s pictures, quotes and “everything in there”? The Chair asked, “So, you are confirming that research?” The response was, “Yes! There’s pictures, live photos, in 1984 that she [Feinstein] flew that Confederate flag right at City Hall.”

A different Committee member asked whether there was any context, since this seems so “facially bizarre.” It could be explained by any number of reasons, including that Feinstein is racist, but why was the Mayor of San Francisco flying a Confederate flag? It just seems so



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odd. “One thing that feels clear is that there would be abundant documentation about such an extraordinary event beyond what we have right now, and I’m just a little concerned that we just, uh, [not] take things at face value without, sort of, corroborating evidence. And I think in this case there should definitely be...”

The first member responded, “I mean, I don’t know how much more evidence you need more than pictures, like, there’s little photos on there. You can see City Hall, you can see – like, there’s literally evidence in front of you.”

Then a fourth Committee member spoke: “So I just was reading some background on it [i.e. while the Committee discussion had been taking place], and her defense was that the flag was part of a pavilion of American flags and supposedly there’s a quote that says, ‘San Francisco’s proud to fly these flags where both visitors and residents alike may see and appreciate the more than 200 years of America’s rich history, which they symbolize.’ [End quote.] So, I mean, that may have been her justification, but obviously it was offensive to a group of people which she proved no sensitivity in taking it down. And that in itself would have been commentary of why it should be taken down, because of what it represented.”

Another Committee member asked, “And you’re reading this where, I’m sorry?”

“Uh, well, I looked up basically why did she keep the display. And, it says it, uh, was published February 27, 2019 by Dan MacGuill. Um, so if you Google it I’m sure you can find it. But basically that was the context that you asked for, is her defending it should be there because it had always been there since 1964, it was part of the Pavillion of Flags that were being displayed. But, you know, just like some other commentary, you know it doesn’t take into consideration with the sensitivities – especially by the Mayor of a city that’s very diverse, and you’re hearing from a group of people that find its display offensive, that she was defending keeping it, simply for show. You know, your political leader’s supposed to be more in depth than that. You’re supposed to show these sensitivities, and in context of evolving to the present time. So a lot of things have changed since they were first put up there for display, and she should have heard from her constituents where it was offensive. So she did do it, she did defend it, and the context was simply it was there, had always been there, and it was for show.”

The Chair responded, “Thank you. I would like to remind committee members that it is incumbent on us to do the research and read the documents and share them in a timely way, uh, and follow up. Um, these are great questions, uh, I think you posed really good questions.” He then addressed the Committee member who originally brought up the issue



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of flying the Confederate Flag (i.e. the one who prepared the Google Sheet). “You as well, thank you. Do you have something to add to that?”

“There was a dedication on that flagpole, I can read what it said, on the Confederate flagpole, that was in front of City Hall. Do you want me to read that dedication?” The Chair said yes. “Okay, so the title says ‘Confederate Battle Standard, 1861. Sometimes called the quote-unquote [makes air quotes] southern cross, the Confederate battle banner was introduced in the Autumn of 1861. General P. [inaudible] of Louisiana designed an arrangement of the blue cross and [inaudible] with the thirteen stars representing the Confederate States of America. A Confederate flag of a different pattern known as the Stars and Bars was raised on March 4, 1861 over the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama during the presidency of Jefferson Davis of [inaudible] Mississippi.’ Then underneath the plaque, which is I’m assuming who paid for the plaque, was the California Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy – paid for it. So it was, the again, California Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy I’m assuming who paid for it. Plaque – or, maybe they didn’t pay, but they are part of – their name has a separate plaque underneath, that plaque.”

“Thank you,” said the Chair.

“So that’s supposed to be the context,” continued the Committee member. “I think that’s very important, because that’s nothing about anti-racism.”

“Okay,” said the Committee Chair. “So, according to our criteria, it seems like Dianne Feinstein meets the criteria, based on the actions of that. Are there any blocking concerns from anyone on the committee?” There were none, so Dianne Feinstein’s name was put on the Yes list for removal.

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT AND INFORMATION: The recommendation to place Diane Feinstein Elementary School on the list to be renamed has generated a lot of press coverage. Unfortunately, the article by Dan MacGuill was not placed in the Google Sheet for reference. However, it seems clear it is this article that was referenced, which explains the incident in great detail: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/dianne-feinstein-confederate-flag/>. An LA Times op-ed published by Nicholas Goldberg on December 9, 2020 summarizes the incidents (which are recounted in much greater detail by MacGuill) as follows: “A Confederate flag ... had flown outside San Francisco’s convention center since 1964 as part of an 18-flag display that was taken down once and for all in 1984 on Feinstein’s orders while she was mayor. The complaint is that before she took it down, she left it up. Indeed, when a protestor tore it down, it was replaced. But, a few days later, after complaints and intervention from an



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African American member of the city's Board of Supervisors [Doris Ward], Feinstein announced that the flag would no longer be flown."

The Committee did accurately identify that Dianne Feinstein was involved with an incident where there was agitation to remove the Confederate Flag and she allowed the flag to fly longer than some people wanted. However, the Committee did not manage to establish a firm understanding of the historical context, possibly due in part to the disjointed research and discussion process. The justification for placing Dianne Feinstein Elementary on the list of schools to be renamed appears to rely upon an extremely broad interpretation of the bullet point pertaining to having "espoused racist beliefs" in regards to this incident, especially given that Senator Feinstein continues to have a long career in San Francisco and California politics since the incident occurred in 1984 up to the present day.

#8; Grattan Elementary [August 26, 00:46:03]: The discussion around Grattan took less than twenty seconds. The Committee Chair began by saying, "Ah, Grattan?" The Committee member who prepared the [Google Sheet](#) said, "So Grattan is named after William Henry Grattan, who was part of the theft of unceded Native land in this state of California." The Committee Chair asked, "So, you're saying that's a yes? Any blocking concerns around that?" There were none, so Grattan Elementary was added to the list of schools to be renamed.

The [Google Sheet](#) cites as the reason for renaming, "theft of unceded Native land in CA, cofounded and was a primary member of an organization that was openly sexist towards all women and would not allowed [sic] any woman regardless of race join." The only source cited is [this link](#), which describes the founding of the Society of California Pioneers, where a William H. Grattan is listed as one of the members (but not as an officer or a member of the board) in 1854.

The [Society of California Pioneers](#) was established in 1850 and continues to exist today. It was a historical and social society at its founding; a brief history can be found [here](#). Other than the fact that its founding expressed the sexist and ethnocentric norms of its time, it is not obvious what would be objectionable about it. Had the Committee wished to understand more fully the history of the Society, they could easily have [contacted](#) the organization and asked.

There appears to have been no effort made to understand who William Henry Grattan was other than to establish that someone named William H. Grattan was a member of the Society of California Pioneers in 1854.

It is possible that Grattan Elementary is actually named after William Henry Grattan Flood,



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who was an Irish author, composer, musicologist and historian. If so, then this is not the same William H. Grattan who was identified as a member of the Society of California Pioneers in 1854, as William Henry Grattan Flood was born in 1857.

#9; Malcolm X Academy [August 26, 00:55:47]: This name was discussed for ten minutes. At first the intention of the Committee Chair was quickly to give a pass (i.e. not recommend for renaming), but then one of the Committee members pointed out that Malcolm X noted in his own autobiography he had been a pimp when he was young; this same Committee member further cited an interview he heard of a biographer suggesting that Malcolm X's misogyny towards women had been minimized. The Committee Chair agreed it was a legitimate consideration and then said, "I think his position in most of his life was about undoing that work and redressing that work, and he did his fair share of reparations around that work, and that would be my explanation for why his name should remain."

The Committee member who had raised the point about misogyny responded to the Chair that the Guiding Principles do not take into consideration the entirety of what someone does with their life, and further suggested that comparing Malcolm X to George Washington is interesting, because George Washington was born a subject to the King of England, yet rose above that to lead the Thirteen Colonies to escape that oppression and establish a new nation under Democratic principles. The Committee Chair countered that the critical difference is that the work Malcolm X did repaired the harm he had done to women, whereas the work George Washington did was not similarly restorative to the harm done to the Indigenous People of America. Another Committee member, who is Native American, agreed with this logic and argued that what George Washington did was not helpful to Indigenous People. After some discussion, the Chair insisted that the distinction of restorative vs. non-restorative work is the key reason why Malcolm X's name should remain, and the Committee agreed Malcolm X Academy should not be renamed.

The discussion was interesting, and could have opened up a much broader conversation on a range of points. For example, was Malcolm X's work truly restorative of any harm he may have caused by his misogyny? How does Malcolm X compare to other historical figures who did some form of restorative work? How important is a one-to-one restorative correspondence in assessing the legacy of a historical figure? What about those historical figures who may not have atoned for a particular sin, but nevertheless did extraordinary work or showed extraordinary character in other regards?

The Malcolm X example highlights that a worthwhile review of complex, significant historical figures requires far more than a perfunctory application of the Guiding Principles adopted by the Committee.



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#10; Sutro Elementary [[August 26, 1:22:54](#)]: It took less than a minute to decide to recommend Adolph Sutro for renaming. There was no substantive discussion; essentially it was just the Committee Member who prepared the [Google Sheet](#) reading the entry, and then a perfunctory agreement that it meets criteria.

The [Google Sheet](#) entry reads as follows: “On the fourth of July in 1897, John Harris, a 38-year-old African American waiter, was denied entry to the Sutro Baths swimming complex, which held jim crow [sic] policies. Harris sued Adolph Sutro – namesake and benefactor of the Baths, mayor of San Francisco, and one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the city – based on racial discrimination under the Dibble Civil Rights Act, California’s pioneering civil rights law. And Harris won.” The source cited is this article: <https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/john-harris-civil-rights.htm>.

This is a case where the facts are correct: this lawsuit did happen, the Sutro Baths were blatantly discriminatory, and it was indeed Adolph Sutro who was sued. But once the historical context is developed, the judgments around how to assign responsibility to Adolph Sutro and how this event should affect our opinion of him become more complicated. The sources consulted to develop the context are the following: (1) *Adolph Sutro: King of the Comstock Lode and Mayor of San Francisco*, by William R. Huber; (2) *Cosmopolitans: A Social and Cultural History of the Jews in San Francisco Bay Area*, by Fred Rosenbaum; (3) this [online history of the Harris lawsuit](#), written by Mike McPhate in 2020 and published at Californiasun.co; (4) the [nps.gov](#) article cited by the Committee.

The Sutro Baths opened for business in early March, 1896. It is unlikely that Adolph Sutro was ever directly involved in the operations of the Baths. Sutro served out his (largely unsuccessful) term as Mayor of San Francisco until January 3, 1897, and after leaving office he appears to have settled into retirement. (From the beginning of Chapter 37 of the *Adolph Sutro* biography: “He returned to Sutro Heights to live out his days walking in his gardens, watching the Pacific Ocean with its fog banks, and hearing the sea lions bark and roar.”) The [nps.gov](#) article states that it was Adolph Sutro’s son, Edgar who was in charge of day-to-day business operations at the baths. Sutro was probably physically frail by July 4, 1897 although he was also probably mentally competent. Sutro suffered a stroke in September of 1897 and again in November of 1897 and appears to have been mentally incompetent from thereafter, dying less than one year later.



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The discrimination practiced by the Sutro Baths was odious. It was also common practice for such businesses at the time. The Californiasun.co article says that “Jim Crow-style racism was rampant in California at the time.” The same article quotes a Santa Rosa newspaper writing about Mr. Harris, “A negro is a negro and his color is his misfortune.” Both the Californiasun.co article and the nps.gov article indicate that the jury in the case asked the judge whether they could disregard the law of the Dibble Act. (Fortunately, they were told no.) The nps.gov article indicates that the defense offered by the Sutro Baths was not that they were failing to adhere to the Dibble Act; instead, it was that following the law would cause undue economic damage to them because white people were the majority of their clientele, who would refuse to swim in the same pool as black people. Edgar Sutro was quoted in the San Francisco Call as saying, “It would be ruinous to allow negroes in the baths, because the white people would be unwilling to mingle with them, and there were not enough colored people to justify separate baths for them.” The Californiasun.co article cites John Martini, author of a history of the Sutro Baths to state that, “the photographic record suggests blacks weren’t welcomed into the pools until the 1940s.”

So although Adolph Sutro was not directly involved in the operations of the Sutro Baths, we certainly have no evidence that he made any effort to fight against the outrageously racist milieu in which the Baths operated. Is this sufficient reason to remove his name from Sutro Elementary? It may be, but before reaching that conclusion we should try to understand why he was honored in the first place.

Adolph Sutro was a successful entrepreneur and businessman who was widely perceived at the time as a champion of the middle class. He fought monopolists like William Ralson and Collis Huntington. (For example, the *Adolph Sutro* biography says Sutro led popular opposition to the Funding Bill, which “would have allowed the Central Pacific Railroad to pay off its multimillion-dollar debt to the U.S. government, due in 1894, in 99 years, at 0.5 percent interest.”) According to *Cosmopolitans*, Sutro “directed much of his time and money toward aiding the city’s poor” and in 1878 “helped initiate the first tuition-free, nonsectarian, privately financed kindergarten in the country, continuing to advance this cause until his death two decades later.” Also according to *Cosmopolitans*, “He planted trees throughout town at his own expense, donated twenty-six acres on Mount Parnassus to the University of California for its medical school, and began the process of gifting to the state his stupendous personal library.” The *Cosmopolitans* book credits Sutro with helping to pave the way for the Progressive movement at the turn of the 19th/20th century.

Because of Sutro’s popularity, the left-wing Populist Party (also known as the People’s Party) approached Sutro in 1894 to run for Mayor of San Francisco. According to the Adolph Sutro



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biography, “His campaign emphasized his opposition to the Southern Pacific Railroad, and to big business in general. Sutro was a man of the people.” When he won, he promised to fight aggressively against corruption. In his inaugural address, Sutro proposed many new public works programs. As mayor, he supported women’s suffrage and continued to oppose the railroad monopolists. Unfortunately, he was ineffectual as mayor due to his inability to navigate the politics of dealing with a hostile Board of Supervisors.

Do these positives outweigh the fact that Sutro Baths operated in a blatantly racist manner? Does it matter that it was common practice for such businesses to exclude Blacks? Is the Harris lawsuit an indication of some particularity of how the Sutro Baths operated, or could any similar business have been similarly sued? Is Sutro’s frail physical condition at the time relevant? Does the fact that the Baths were operated by Adolph’s son, Edgar, mitigate Adolph’s responsibility – or should we hold Adolph fully responsible for not insisting that the Baths at the very least comply with the Dibble Act? If we do want to count the positives in favor of Adolph Sutro, then how do we do so? Should we measure the amount of good that he did through his acts? Does it matter that he was politically progressive for his time, or that he championed the cause of women’s suffrage? How should we measure and assess any personal animus he may have had towards Blacks or other racial groups, such as Asians?

All of this – and much more – would have made for a valuable and illuminating discussion to try to reassess the legacy of this complicated historical figure. It is a pity this discussion did not happen. Perhaps it still can.

This report is created by volunteers for Families for San Francisco. Our Mission is to organize families and committed residents of San Francisco into a collective political voice. Our goal is the continued betterment of San Francisco for all who love this city and make it their home. Learn more and join us at

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