

Time to consider Indigenous names

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INDIGENOUS people have had a long connection to the land on which our city is built. Traditional place names were descriptive of the land and practised through a complete and meaningful understanding of locality. The names reflected the animate tendencies within Indigenous languages, which were illustrative of nature.

When colonialism forcibly displaced Indigenous people, Indigenous lands and their names were either modified or removed. Places were renamed after settlers, or assumed names taken directly from Europe to reflect the settlers' own culture and history. Names were altered from Indigenous languages to English or French adaptations, such as in the case of Winnipeg, which derived from the Cree word "Win-nipi" or "murky waters."

The loss of Indigenous place names contributed to the loss of Indigenous languages and traditions, including oral histories.

Today, the reclamation of space, land, culture and language has risen for Indigenous people. Histories and contributions of Indigenous people within our city are moving toward being recognized and restored. Additionally, the city has begun to acknowledge the hurt caused by place names and monuments that represent colonial figures who advocated for the erasure of Indigenous people.

Calls for their removal have been propelled by the revelations of unmarked graves at Indian Residential Schools across Canada. One example is Bishop Grandin Boulevard, named after Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin, who advocated for residential schooling and believed First Nations people needed to be "civilized."

Also in the discussion is the Wolseley neighbourhood, along with Wolseley Avenue and Wolseley School, which celebrate General Garnet Wolseley, who led a campaign to incite displacement and violence toward Indigenous peoples, specifically Métis peoples.

History is a permanent point within our past, witnessed in history books. A monument or place name can serve as an act of celebration for individuals who committed repeated injustices and violence; its removal doesn't equate to an "erasure of history," as some critics state. Nor should such markers, as some argue, remain in place as a method of "education" on their action; instead, it should be their removal

that educates the public about their violent legacy.

The continuing presence of such names within our city instils harm and fear for Indigenous peoples who are continuously reminded of the intergenerational tragedy. Removing them creates space for the resurgence of traditional place names. It makes room for a celebration of Indigenous people who have contributed to our community and the revival of Indigenous knowledge and languages.

The new initiative “Welcoming Winnipeg: Reconciling Our History” guides the city in making decisions regarding requests to create, add to, or remove/rename historical markers and place names to address the absence of Indigenous perspectives, experiences and contributions in the stories remembered and commemorated.

“Welcoming Winnipeg” is defined as achieving a balanced perspective and story, honouring Indigenous people while promoting Indigenous reclamation of land, space and/or language. Moreover, it offers an educational opportunity and supports telling the complete history of Winnipeg.

The committee has been reviewing requests since early 2021, many of which have taken the approach of commemorating Indigenous people or shedding light on names that continue to cause harm.

Rooster Town was a community of Métis families that settled on land in the Grant Park area. The city forcibly removed them from their homes in 1960, displacing Métis people and appropriating their land. Rooster Town should be reclaimed and commemorated by renaming Pan Am Park, where the community initially stood.

Papoose Park, located in the Niakwa neighborhood, carries a racial connotation in its use of “Papoose”; an effort is being made for it to be removed and renamed.

Many applications seek to honour Indigenous people who have contributed to our community. Sgt. Tommy Prince, Canada’s most decorated Indigenous soldier, advocated for Indigenous rights and should be celebrated with a historical marker. Theodore Fontaine, an Indigenous leader who attended the Assiniboia Residential School in the River Heights community and dedicated his life to bringing awareness to Canada’s Indian Residential Schools, is proposed for recognition and commemoration in Wellington Park, which is currently named after Arthur Wellington Ross, who was associated with Indigenous dispossession.

Although the renaming of streets is not part of the Welcoming Winnipeg agenda, the committee was consulted to advise on a process to rename Bishop Grandin Boulevard.

The initiative is the beginning of the process of commemorating Indigenous peoples in our city.

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Bishop Grandin Boulevard is one of several Winnipeg places whose names are being reconsidered.

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