

*Agency of Administration*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **State of Vermont** |  | |
| **Department of Libraries**  60 Washington Street |  |  |
| Barre, VT 05641 |  |  |

# VERMONT BOARD OF LIBRARIES

**Special Geographic Names Hearing**

**MINUTES**

**June 17, 2021**

**10:00 a.m. – 12:31 p.m.**

**Meeting conducted Virtually via Microsoft Teams & In-Person at Department of Libraries, 60 Washington Street, Barre**

**In Attendance:** Bruce Post (Chair), Deborah Granquist (Vice Chair), Tom Frank, Maxie Ewins, Linda Saarnijoki, James Saunders, Jason Broughton (Secretary)

**Others Present:** Cherie Yaeger (VTLIB), Janette Shaffer (VTLIB), Thomas McMurdo (VTLIB), April Shaw (VTLIB), Joshua Muse (VTLIB), Alexander Hazzard (Negro Brook Alliance), Elise Guyette (Negro Brook Alliance), Evan Litwin (Negro Brook Alliance), Charles Marchant, Howard Weiss-Tisman, Kina Thorpe, Matthew O’Donnell (Contractor USBGN), Jennifer Runyon (USBGN), Kathleen Kemp, Irene Wrenner, Avery Powell, K. Signorello, Lynne Shea, Ann, Jeane Zentz, Elisa Petty, Heidi, Sam, Scott Garvin, Sherwood Lake (Townshend Select Board Chair), Kindle Farm School, Laura Chapman, Olga Peters (The Commons), Curtiss Reed, Jr., Bryn Hoffman (Cobleigh Library), Derek Brouwer (Seven Days), Dale Stevens, Peter Bergstrom, Stephanie Amyot, WCAX, Joel Colf, Cindy, Catherine L., Ella Kinsman, Whichie Artu (VP NAACP), Olivia Lyons, Mike Lance, JTM, Sarah Schuldenfrei, Jeryl Julion Cisse, June Cerveny, Linda, Brenda Poku, Eloise, Chris Mays (Brattleboro Reformer), Charlene Galarneau, Andrew Clark, Peter Stebbins, Rob Kirkpatrick, Lisa Wardle, Khonsu X, Wendy Clark, and Kermit Blackwood.

**Call to Order:** Chair Bruce Post called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m.

Board members introduced themselves to hearing attendees. Post then asked Thomas McMurdo, Assistant State Librarian of Information & Access, to go over the virtual meeting procedures. McMurdo stated that chat would be disabled for the meeting. When the petitioners and public were called on to speak they would be unmuted, and cameras enabled by department staff.

**Public to be Heard:**

A member of the public attending the meeting via phone asked how to raise their hands via the phone. McMurdo said that anyone on the meeting via phones did not have a way to raise their hands; however, they would also not be muted like attendees attending via their computers. When the board chair opened the meeting up for the public to be heard phone attendees, could say they wanted to comment, and they would be called on by the chair.

With no further comments from the public, Post entertained motions to reopen the Renaming Negro Brook hearing from December 8, 2020. Linda Saarnijoki moved to reopen the hearing; Maxie Ewins seconded the motion. Motion passed unanimously.

**Resumption of Public Hearing on renaming Negro Brook petition:**

Post started the public hearing on the renaming Negro Brook petition. Post stated that the meeting would start with 15 minutes for the petitioners to update the board on the petition. The meeting would then move to Jason Broughton, State Librarian, for a chance to speak on behalf of the Department of Libraries, and discussion would then move to board members for discussion and allow questions from the public.

Evan Litwin, petitioner, talked about the history of the area around Negro Brook and how it is the native land of ELNU Abenaki. Litwin also noted that the petitioners have support for the name change from ELNU Abenaki

Chief Roger Longtoe Sheehan. Litwin also mentioned the naming decisions recently made in Texas to remove Negro from 16 different sites around the state. These sites will now have new names, all referencing black people from Texas history.

Board member James Saunders asked Mr. Litwin if he felt that the organization of the United Negro College Fund should change their name to remove the word Negro. Litwin stated he did not see how that question was relevant to the renaming Negro Brook petition and the United Negro College Fund is not public land on a map.

Jason Broughton asked Mr. Litwin if the petitioners still feel the word Negro is racist, due to organizations like the United Negro College Fund. Litwin noted this is a conversation happening all over the U.S., and the petitioners have had conversations with people who do not want to see the brook named Negro Brook any longer. Whether anyone thinks the name is offensive or not does not take away from people wanting to remove an outdated racial term from a geographic location name. Elise Guyette responded to Broughton’s question and said that the U.S. Board of Geographic Names is removing racist names from geographic features around the country and Negro is one of the words being removed from names. Alex Hazzard then responded to Broughton’s question and stated, as a black person, he does find the word Negro offensive and that there is a complicated history around the word Negro.

Mr. Hazzard continued that he wanted to address some of the concerns in reference to the name Toby. The petitioners reached out to several federal and state-level Black or African American organizations, including the National African American History Museum, the National Association of African American Studies, the Center for African American History at Northwestern University, the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Mr. Hazzard noted that none of those organizations responded back that the name was offensive. Mr. Hazzard read a response from Kate McMahon from the National African American History Museum. In her response, Ms. McMahon noted the name did originate during the time of enslavement, and while Susanna Toby’s name had a racial history, she did not feel the name was any more racist than Susanna. Dr. Guyette noted she also contacted Meadow Dibble of Atlantic Black Box, who responded she had never heard that Toby was an offensive name.

Mr. Hazzard told the board the Rename Negro Brook Alliance held a community meeting on April 26, 2021, with people in and around Townshend to discuss the petition. One item that came from that community meeting was that attendees did want to see the name changed from Negro Brook to Susanna Toby Brook. The second item that came from the meeting was that, if the name of the brook was not named after a black person, the attendees would rather not see the name change at all and stay Negro Brook. The third item to come from the meeting was that people did not want the name to be centered around slavery, themes of slavery or white saviorhood. Mr. Hazzard clarified what he meant by white saviorhood, and naming the brook after Susanna Toby would show her resilience living in and around Townshend.

Post mentioned that at one time the Townshend Historical Society suggested Freedom Brook, and that the Rename Negro Brook Alliance claimed that name could be considered polite racism. Post also pointed out that one of the name changes in Texas was to Freedom Hollow and Juneteenth is also referred to as Freedom Day. Evan Litwin responded to this by noting that he believed there was a misunderstanding of his statement. At the time that the Townshend Historical Society proposed that name, Freedom Brook, the Rename Negro Brook Alliance had spent a great deal of time on the renaming petition and research into a Susanna Toby and her life in Townshend. At this time Kermit Blackwood, a citizen of Townshend, spoke up and asked that talk about the renaming of the brook not center around racism and asked to move on to the issue at hand.

Post then asked Commissioner Broughton to share his comments and research that the Department of Libraries conducted for the Renaming Negro Brook petition. Commissioner Broughton stated the role of the Department is to assist both the board and petitioners. He then spoke about conversations he and VTLIB staff have had with the petitioners over the past two years and went over the timeline of dates and interactions between the petitioners and VTLIB staff.

After some discussion concerning some of the interactions with the petitioners and VTLIB staff, Post spoke on the name Toby and what his research turned up in reference to this name and its racist connotations. Dr. Guyette said she previously asked Jason Broughton if the spelling of Toby could be change to Tobe, since Susanna’s name was spelled both ways. This could be done to detract from the spelling of Toby in connotation to it being a racist name. Jason told Dr. Guyette that the spelling could be changed to Tobe, without submitting a new petition, if the board chose to do this.

Post then turned the meeting over to board discussion on the petition. Tom Frank noted that he spoke to a friend who is a history teacher in New Jersey about his understanding of the name Toby. Frank said that his friend stated that answers will vary from person to person on the meaning of Toby and whether they consider it racist or not.

Maxie Ewins expressed dismay about the state of discord with this petition. Ewins also asked how many of the attendees at the meeting the Renaming Negro Brook Alliance held in April were from Townshend. Mr. Litwin noted that some of the attendees were from Townshend, and most of the other attendees were from surrounding towns in the area of Townshend.

Linda Saarnijoki asked if she heard correctly that a geographic name could not have the first name of a person, as part of the name. Post said that was not correct, a name can have a first name and a last name together or just a last name. Saarnijoki also expressed agreement with Maxie on the state of fraught discourse surrounding this naming petition. She also noted that, with all of the fraught discussions aside, the board has two decisions it needs to make. First, will the board change the name of Negro Brook?, and she believes there is a general consensus that this needs to happen. The second decision for the board is what does it get named, and this is where the appropriateness of the petition and the name presented to the board becomes a part of discussion. The Board needs to decide if the name Susanna Toby is the appropriate name to rename this brook, and if the correct research has been done for this petition to move forward. If the board does not feel that this is the best name for the brook, they need to defeat this position based on facts and research completed for this petition.

Jenny Runyon, from the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, talked about using first and last names to name a geographic feature after a person versus only using the last name of a person to name a geographic feature. Ms. Runyon encouraged the board not to get hung up on discussion of using a first and last name vs. only using one name. Ms. Runyon said the board has two decisions to make: should the name of the brook be changed and what is the best replacement.

Post then opened the floor to public comment. Whichie Artu, 2nd Vice-President of the VT NAACP of Windham County, shared his pride of living in Vermont and helping to build diverse communities. Whichie noted that in Vermont black history has been erased. Also, there are many geographic names in Vermont with the names of white men, and it is time to see more diverse names being used.

Sherwood Lake, Chair of the Townshend Select Board, told the Board of Libraries that the select board has voted to put the renaming of Negro Brook out to the voters during the next Town Meeting, March, 2022. From that vote they will decide if the town submits its own petition to rename Negro Brook.

Laura Chapman, 3rd Vice President the VT NAACP of Windham County, asked the board if it would be allowable to use the full first name and last name as an initial only for the name of the brook. Ms. Chapman also asked if there was a way for the Townshend Select Board to put the question of renaming Negro Brook to the voters of the Townshend sooner than the next Town Meeting.

Khonsu X asked if a plaque could be placed in Townshend State Park in reference to Susanna Toby, referencing her married name Hussy. Mr. Blackwood referenced the book ‘Stitch in Time’, a history of Townshend, and the mention of other black people who lived in town on Negro Brook.

Post then put the question to the board on what they would like to do at this point in the hearing.

Frank moved to close the hearing on the Renaming Negro Brook petition. Granquist seconded. Motion passed unanimously with Post concurring.

Granquist asked if the petition could be withdrawn by the petitioners. Broughton answered this question based on conversations with the Assistant Attorney General who advises the Department of Libraries. The petition cannot be withdrawn. The board has three options available to them. They can vote the petition up, vote it down or table the discussion for a later date. Saarnijoki asked if the board voted down renaming Negro Brook to Susannah Toby Brook, can another petition be submitted to change the name of this brook to something other than Susannah Toby Brook. Jason Broughton confirmed that another petition can be submitted to rename Negro Brook.

Saarnijoki moved to defeat the petition to rename Negro Brook to Susanna Toby Brook. Saunders seconded the motion. Granquist asked for a restatement of the motion. Saarnijoki repeated the motion.

Vote was conducted by Post and motion passed unanimously to defeat the petition to rename Negro Brook to Susanna Toby Brook.

Linda Saarnijoki wants it stated that the Board of Libraries is in favor of changing the name of Negro Brook and welcomes another petition to change the name of this brook.

Maxie Ewins moved to adjourn the meeting. Linda Saarnijoki seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

**Adjournment:** The meeting adjourned at 12:37.