

# Confronting history: W&M Board of Visitors split on 'imperatives' to rename buildings at the college

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# WYDAILY

DAILY NEWS FOR SOUTHEAST VIRGINIA



William & Mary's campus in 2013. The Wren Building (center) sits at the end of the Sunken Garden.  
(WYDaily file/Courtesy of W&M News)

The College of William & Mary is coming to terms with its ties to slavery and racism.

After the death of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis who died after a white officer pressed a knee on his neck, the university created a task force, the Principles of Naming and Renaming Working Group, to rename buildings, spaces or structures and to add other markers on campus with historical context to be more inclusive.

W&M's Board of Visitors on Monday heard an update from Warren Buck, chairman of the task force, about the group's progress so far.

"This working group began its first session on the 30th of June," Buck said. "We've met for 17 hours since then."

He told the board the task force's work hours didn't include countless emails and the six listening session with students, faculty, staff and alumni. So far, the feedback the group received about renaming buildings and other structures was "don't change any names" to "change all of the building names," he said.

"But a majority of the folks in the listening session were really in favor for finding criteria to rename and how to rename," he said, adding they wanted to be morally correct not politically correct. "Confront history, not erase it."

He, along with W&M President Katherine Rowe, presented three "imperatives" to the board of as part of the update:

- The campus landscape should teach.
- The campus landscape should affirm and bear witness to complexity.
- The campus landscape should promote fearless and level-headed self-examination of the history and present state of the university.

The task force plans to use the following timeline:

# PNR WORKING GROUP *UPDATE*

## August

- Mission Imperatives presented to the Board
- Draft Principles posted for community feedback

## August-Sept Board Meetings

- Principles of Naming and Renaming (after community feedback)
- Short list of new names to consider
- Short list of suggested buildings/places to rename
- Land Acknowledgement

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The timeline of the Principles for Naming and Renaming Group at the College of William & Mary.  
(WYDaily/ Screenshot courtesy of the W&M BOV)

Rowe expanded on each of the items, noting the teach principle would not romanticize history and use words, stories and imagery to add context.

She said the renaming would focus on Confederates first, then build a list of names that would be more inclusive.

Will Payne, vice rector, asked the board to approve the imperatives and John Littel, the board's rector, said the board was not expected to approve the recommendations Monday but could if the members wanted to.

But not everyone was on board with the task force's imperatives.

Brian Woolfolk, a board member, said he did not feel comfortable approving the imperatives Monday, adding the Board of Visitors only had them for less than 24 hours.

“The imperatives we have here, along with the working principles that are presented in this letter, really are great if it's a museum, but this is a place of higher learning, it's a public institution for students who feel like they've been discriminated against and are faced with all types of racist imagery and white supremacist imagery on this campus have said enough is enough,” Woolfolk said. “We should be doing a lot better than what we are doing with regard to responding to what these interests are of alumni and students and people that have told you over and over and over again that this campus is an unwelcoming and a discriminatory environment.”

The task force did not present a list of names for the board and some board members were split about whether it was the board's right to ask for a list of unfiltered names of buildings the task force was considering renaming.

"We're trying to sequence it so we can do things as quickly as possible to do that," Littel said.

Woolfolk wanted a list of unfiltered names.

"The sequencing is problematic," Woolfolk said. "But it was made clear based on everything I've seen...their focus is only [on renaming] buildings and structures."

Charles Poston, another board member, said he felt the the Board of Visitors should support the task force's timeline and it would be impossible for the task force to look at every program, every name and to come up with names in a few months.

When asked what building names should be on the renaming list, Buck said they are still working on finding out who the people the buildings are named after really were.

And the task force needs time to do that.

He mentioned a few they were considering renaming: Ewell Hall, Ewell Cemetery and Ewell Circle named after Colonel Benjamin Stoddert Ewell, a Confederate officer and the 16th president of the college.

The Board of Visitors did not vote or approve the imperatives during the meeting and ended the discussion, thanking Rowe and Buck for the update before moving on to the next agenda item.

In a previous announcement about the group, the university noted the task force would present a final report to Rowe at the February 2021 board meeting.

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