‘They Carry a Heavy Burden’

The movement to get William Saunders’ name off a classroom building has gained momentum toward an expected decision in May.

by David E. Brown ’75

For a trustees meeting it was an afternoon filled with cutting words. Alston Gardner ’79, chair of the University Affairs Committee, assuring a group formed around the concerns of students of color that indeed they belong there (the group had asked them Gardner testing the freedman’s work of sculptor Julian Carr (Class of ’86) at the dedication of the Confederate soldier statue in 1903—citing his pride in having hua-whipped a Negro youth until her skin hung in shreds.”

Student members of the Real Silent Sam Coalition reacted, too — racist comments written by their Carolina classmates on the social media app Yik Yak, and the names of these with white supremacy in their background for whom UNC buildings are named.

“Is quite obvious to most people studying or working within the UNC System that the history of North Carolina reflects the history of the United States. It is good, it is bad, at times it has been very, very ugly,” said Deborah Stanmore ’86 (MA), a member of the business school faculty and president of the Carolina Black Caucus. “And sadly many can live most of their lives happily in America, never really learning the real history of our great country.”
There are no primary documents or written evidence that Saunders was ever a member or a leader of the KKK.

Congressional leaders and investigators identified Saunders as the head of the Invisible Empire in NC.

Reputable historians have identified Saunders as the leader of the KKK.

The 1920 UNO meeting minutes identified him as "Head of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina."
History Professor Jim Leoulodis ‘77 (89 PhD) gave a statesmanlike lesson, which his students pay to hear, on Reconstruction and Jim Crow in North Carolina. He finished by saying that these students of 2015—who insist their troubles didn’t end with the Emancipation Proclamation or Brown vs. Board or the sit-ins or the approval of the Stone Center for Black Culture and History—“carry a heavy burden.”

For two hours, the committee listened to eight invited speakers who were evenly divided about whether to scrub a 93-year-old classroom building clean of the name of William Saunders, a member of the class of 1854, soldier, political leader, historian, fellow trustee and now generally acknowledged to have been a leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the audience of maybe 100 that March day, among the usual cast of University administrators, were students the trustees had provided with buses to the off-campus site. They chanted briefly, groaned some and repeatedly snapped their fingers in a less-interruptive form of applause.

Borrowing from advice he’d received since a year ago, when he and fellow trustee Charles Duckett ’82 started studying the issue of the question of an unprecedented renaming, Gardner suggested there are three very different perspectives from which to view Saunders Hall and the 10 or so other buildings on campus named for people whose legacies include ties to white supremacy along with the famous Confederate statue of McCorkle Place: the time that is being memorialized, the date the edifice was erected; and the present.

To the students, the last of those is all that matters. “This movement is about the future of this University. It is about facing the violent racial history of UNC-Chapel Hill, the state of North Carolina and of the United States,” said senior Dylan Mott.

“It is about this institution actually taking action against racism and violence. ... The fact that the Board of Trustees at the time believed that that was a meritorious [sic] act is for us evidence enough that [the] Saunders building needs to be renamed.” (Mott’s reference was to the fact that the information available to the trustees in 1922 when they approved the naming included Saunders’ attribute as “Head of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina.”)

The trustees agreed in March to extend their research, and they reached out to the public on a website. A few days later, Duckett made a specific plea to the faculty to weigh in. The full board is expected to announce a decision in May on whether to delete Saunders’ name. Should it choose to rename, another debate could emerge on the replacement.

The Real Silent Sam students are convinced it should be that of Zora Neale Hurston, the anthropologist and writer of the first half of the 20th century who studied briefly—and in secret—in a theater class taught by playwright Paul Green ‘21 in 1940. That choice likely would have to go through the University’s detailed vetting process for such honorees. There’s been little talk of alternatives. Arch Allen ’62 (’65 LLBJD), chair of the Pope Center for Higher Education, spoke at the March meeting and suggested the building be renamed for William Holden, who was impeached and removed as the state’s governor in 1871 for his efforts to fight the Klan.

Letters to The Daily Tar Heel generally have supported renaming. Faculty and staff in the two departments in Saunders, geography and religious studies, are for it. Student body president-elect Houston Summers said he will make it a priority of his administration.

The eight speakers said “yes” and “no” to renaming, but their strongest comments emphasized an entirely different level of education about UNC’s history and its collective present with regard to race.

Before joining the Center for American
‘The actions carried out by the Ku Klux Klan, of which he was an integral part, can only be described as acts of terrorism against fellow Americans.’

Frank Pray
a sophomore and president of UNC’s College Republicans

Progress, Sam Fulwood ’78 worked for three decades in journalism, including with the Los Angeles Times, where he created a national race-relations beat; his articles were part of a package that won a Pulitzer Prize for the Times’ coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King verdict. Fulwood, who is African-American, told the trustees at the March meeting:

“I strongly believe that it should continue to bear his name, with prominent explanation and historical contextualization as a signal history lesson for future generations. I am convinced that scraping his name from the facade of the building would represent a cowardly step toward erasure of our shared history.

“As unsettling and painful as that history might be, we owe it to future generations to understand why that building bears Saunders’ name. The history embodied by Saunders Hall stands less as an honor to a reputed Klansman and more as a marker of what we have overcome.”

Law professor Eric Muller agreed.

“The best way for us as a leading research university is not to remove Saunders’ name,” he said, “but to make Saunders Hall into a site that teaches future generations the disturbing lesson that Carolina was built not just on the excellence of a William Friday but on the ugliness of a William Saunders.

“By simply renaming Saunders Hall we might do a brief service to our own generation, but it would soon be forgotten, and we would squander the chance to educate ourselves and our children and our grandchildren about aspects of Carolina’s history that many would rather forget.

“So my argument is not to remove the name of William Saunders, but to turn the building named after him into a site of

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Past and Present Judgment: What the Committee Heard

Jim Leloudis '77 ('89 PhD)
history professor and head of UNC's Honors Program

I've been on this campus long enough to see this issue come around and around again — things are said, things are done, and there is no kind of ongoing legacy and engagement with these issues. And I think that we are a weaker institution. Now, I understand and respect the concern expressed by some members of the community that there might be a risk here of imposing modern-day standards on actors who lived in a very different time and under very different circumstances. I understand their concern, but I also think it's misplaced for two reasons.

First, if we're not to judge the past in the light of our own moral principles, then I wonder how we're to evaluate and learn from it. It won't do to say that Saunders and his compatriots engaged in reprehensible behavior and then to add that it's not our place to judge them because they were, after all, simply men of their time — a time in which racism was commonplace. That strikes me as a rather unsettling form of moral relativism that leaves the past utterly accountable to those of us to live with its legacy today.

And second, I think that concern about treating the past unfairly is grounded in historic inaccuracy. The fact of the matter is that the story of race in public life in North Carolina during the second half of the 19th century is quite complex and quite remarkable. On two occasions, first in the late 1860s and then again in the mid- to late 1890s, black North Carolinians and their white allies — about a third of white citizens — joined forces, forged powerful biracial political alliances and won control of state government. They did so for the first time in 1868 under the banner of the Republican party, and they gave us a new constitution, a constitution that for the first time in North Carolina’s history mandated the establishment of a system of public schools and guaranteed universal male suffrage. We still live with that constitution today.

And then in the 1890s, black Republicans and white populists joined in what they called a fusion alliance. Together they won control of the Legislature and the governor’s office. And this is important because this is the only time in the only place in the South where biracial politics were that successful. And the fusionists again ushered in an era of reform that included expanded investment in public schools, the founding of a land grant college for African-Americans, and passage of one of the fairest election laws in this state’s history. William Saunders and men of his ilk could not defeat those alliances at the ballot box so they turned to violence, violence perpetrated by the Klan in the 1860s and by vigilantes known as the Red Shirts in the 1890s.

Alston Gardner '77
trustee and chair of the trustees' University Affairs Committee

In some of the public statements, some minority students have questioned if they belonged at UNC. Let me start by saying, let's be very direct, clear and unequivocal — you belong here. This is as much your University as any other student, any other alumnus, of the University. You're a critical part. We admitted you to UNC. You are part of our family. You are part of our community.

Omololu Babatunde
senior
Real Silent Sam Coalition

We feel more than ever that the time is now to take a stand and reflect the moral character and intellectual maturity of UNC students and leadership. Our nation is wrestling with the demons that Saunders loosed on the southern part of heaven. If we choose to keep Saunders Hall as a marker of UNC’s character, we will find ourselves, ultimately, on the wrong side of history again.

Taylor Webber-Fields
senior
Real Silent Sam Coalition

This fight to rename Saunders is not a new thing. People have been organizing around this site and the legacy of white supremacy that it reflects on and off since 1999. You ask us: What would it mean to rename Saunders? We ask you: What would it mean to? What would it mean to generations of incoming students to continue to enter an environment that endorses racial violence? What does it mean to generations of students to know that, despite our vocalized dissent, attacks against our personhood continue to go unchallenged? We are all UNC students, and we will continue to mobilize until our campus environment reflects that.

Alfred Brophy
law professor

I hope we will have a project that puts William Saunders into context so that we will learn about him and his ideas and the ideas that set back the course of racial progress for decades.

But I hope we will look at that alongside people like William Gaston of the N.C. Supreme Court, who spoke against slavery in 1832, over in Gerrard Hall, as well as enslaved people whose labor helped build this school and to sustain it and how in the 20th century this school sometimes supported Jim Crow and in other times opposed it. The University of North Carolina, once built by slaves, is now dedicated to a very different issue.

A building name by itself can't present complexity and chaos of our history in which the labor of enslaved people who would never see this institution funded it, and many generations later we become known for our role in excellent education for everybody without regard to race, and we're known especially for opportunities for students of modest means. Only a comprehensive history can do that.

ONLINE: For two hours on March 25, the University Affairs Committee listened to eight invited speakers, who were evenly divided about whether to scrub a 93-year-old classroom building clean of the name of William Saunders. Those who were there found the event captivating. You can watch it in its entirety at bot.unc.edu/agendas.
provocation: A provocation to remember the ugliness and not just the excellence in Carolina's history, a provocation to reflect on how the advancement of our beloved institution was often entangled with human suffering, and a provocation to each successive generation — our own and future ones — to ask ourselves the uncomfortable question of who among us deserves celebration and who does not.

Among those who favor renaming, the word "terrorism" often is mentioned.

"Saunders was not simply a man who held prominent racist beliefs of the time period," said Frank Pray, a sophomore and president of UNC's College Republicans. He was a man who took those beliefs and translated them into horrible actions that most individuals, even during that time period, knew were unacceptable. The actions carried out by the Ku Klux Klan, of which he was an integral part, can only be described as acts of terrorism against fellow Americans.

"The Klan's use of terrorism was clearly something that is not only considered unacceptable in modern standards but was considered equally negative during the time period in which he lived. This is the key factor that makes the naming of Saunders Hall objectively different from the naming of other buildings on campus, such as Spencer and Aycock."

The UNC library's Virtual Museum of University History identifies 10 people for whom buildings on the campus are named — including six residence halls, two classroom buildings, an administrative building and the student bookstore — as having ties to white supremacy. (The details can be found at museum.unc.edu/exhibits/names.)

"If the options were simply to remove the name or to leave it, I would vote in an instant to remove it, for reasons you've heard today," Leloudis said. And, as Muller pointed out, those who approved the Saunders naming in 1922 were two generations beyond Saunders' acts.

"There's also no doubt," Leloudis continued, "that [one of] Saunders' contemporaries, the eminent historian of North Carolina Joseph Hamilton, who was a defender of the Klan and for whom Hamilton Hall is named, and the trustees who named this building for Saunders in the 1920s celebrate
his influence in that organization, and again
I just want to urge us to call the Klan what
it was — a terrorist insurgency that used
murder and extralegal violence to over-
throw democratically elected governments.

And that’s why I’m drawn to a third
option, and that is the option to curate and
bring scholarship and bring teaching to
bear on Saunders Hall and other contested
spaces across our campus. ... I think this
curation, however it’s configured, is vitally
important because we can’t let this his-
orical moment evaporate.”

In the 10 months since students pre-
sented an 800-signature petition calling for
the renaming, Gardner and Duckett said
they had spent hundreds of hours research-
ing the issue and interviewed about 200
people.

Members of Real Silent Sam declared
at a rally in January that Saunders’ name
symbolized the continuing second-class
status on campus of blacks and other peo-
ple of color. The coalition also wants UNC
to provide information on its racial past
at orientation and to attach contextual
information to the Confederate war statue
erected in McCorkle Place more than a
century ago. They have backed off previous
demands to have Silent Sam removed.

The coalition is adamant, punctuating
their rallies with shouts of “Can you hear
us now?” They say they are not asking for
Saunders to morph into Hurston Hall —
they’re demanding it.

But they have not been characterized by
the overt rage of the cafeteria strike in the
1960s or the demands for the black cultural
center of the ’80s.

Nearby schools have dealt with renam-
ings recently. Duke University and East
Carolina University have decided to
remove the name of Charles B. Aycock
(class of 1880), whose name is tied to white
supremacy, from campus buildings. Carolina
also has a dorm named for Aycock.

Clemson University is discussing
whether to rename Tillman Hall, a promi-
inent campus landmark at the school’s
main entrance. Tillman was South Carolina
governor in the Reconstruction era and
a leader of the Red Shirts militia, which
campaigned to put down the black vote,
sometimes violently.

ONLINE: The University Affairs
Committee’s March 25 meeting is available at
bot.unc.edu/agendas.

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