

Blotting out bigotry won't change it

Reminders of past mistakes can help us learn in future

"History is a trick we play on the dead." —Voltaire

Honorable, well-intentioned people have suggested stripping the name Stapleton from the neighborhood sprouting up around the former airport, founded in 1929 by Denver Mayor Benjamin Franklin Stapleton. Similar suggestions were made in 1998 that the name "Sand Creek" be removed from the list of "Battles" on the pedestal of the Colorado soldier statue guarding the west side of the Col-



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orado Capitol. Those wanting to remove "Sand Creek" from the list of Colorado "battles" rightly pointed out that it was no battle, but a massacre of peaceful Indians, mostly women and children, camped where the Army told them to camp under white and American flags.

As the battle of Sand Creek raged anew, an unexpected and instructive thing happened. Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, including descendants of Sand Creek survivors, said they did not want Sand Creek erased. They wanted whites, and their own people, to remember that tragedy. They were right. Such tragedies teach unforgettable history lessons.

Our Colorado Historical Society, our governor and our legislature wisely listened to the Native Americans and did not erase Sand Creek. It is a lesson in racism. Some think racism is inevitable, that it is a natural human instinct helping to keep families, clans and tribes proud and cohesive. The important point, it seems to me, is: recognize racism

exists and try to control it. Racism creates problems — including reverse racism.

Coloradans and Americans have come far in this ongoing struggle. The rights, legal protections and opportunities offered to all colors, creeds, sexual-preference groups and nationalities might be the greatest achievement of modern America. Certainly we have progressed in Colorado, as a closer look at the Klan-infested 1920s and the career of Stapleton reveals.

Mayor Benjamin Franklin Stapleton in 1923 joined the Denver klavern of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, becoming member No. 1,128. At a July 14, 1924, Klan rally on South Table Mountain in Golden, Stapleton told kluxers, "I will work with the Klan and for the Klan in the upcoming election, heart and soul. And if I am re-elected I shall give the Klan the kind of administration it wants." Not only Stapleton, may-

Flip to BIGOTRY on 4B

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2002

Bigotry: Social club under hood?

Continued from 3B

or of Denver 1923-1931 and 1935-1947, but Colorado governor Clarence Morley and Colorado U.S. Senator Rice Means joined and championed the KKK. As one out of every 10 Coloradans paid the Klan's \$10 klctoken (initiation fee), it became a most powerful political force. Many politicians joined, hoping for KKK support, which swung many close elections.

Robert Alan Goldberg's solidly researched, thoughtful and fair book, *Hooded Empire*, concludes that many Colorado Klansmen (and klanswomen) saw it as a reform outfit devoted to ending bootlegging and other crimes, as a way to end the political corruption that infected both major parties. Coloradans joined the KKK for a surprising variety of reasons, from improving public education to having something to do on an evening or weekend. "Klansmen," as Goldberg

Book-signing

■ What: Dr. Tom and co-authors Bill Hanson and Chuck Woodward will sign their new books on Park Hill and Lowry neighborhoods
■ When and where: 7 p.m. Dec. 12 at the Tattered Cover in lower downtown and Dec. 16 at the Lowry Branch of the Denver Public Library.

writes, "escaped their routine lives twice a week to mingle in the klavern with the exalted cyclops and his nighthawks," enjoying "an exotic fraternal life complete with ghostly costumes and eerie burning crosses." On regular lodge nights, Kluxers watched wrestling matches, listened to concerts of the 200-mem-

ber Klan band, and planned parades, rallies and picnics that attracted as many as 100,000 Coloradans.

History is not easy, not just a matter of installing and removing names. We can learn from villains as well as heroes, from mistakes as well successes. People understandably concerned about Stapleton's hooded past should be allowed to express those legitimate concerns, perhaps in a counter-marker or plaque besides one that might also explain Stapleton's achievements and that he left the Klan in 1925 and said, "True Americanism needs no mask or disguise. Any attempt to stir up racial prejudices or religious intolerance is contrary to our constitution and is therefore un-American."

Tom Noel teaches at CU-Denver and welcomes your comments at coloradowebsites.com/dr-colorado

In many eyes, Stapleton name no longer flies

By B. Scott Bortnick
Special to The Denver Post

Former Denver mayor Benjamin Stapleton's name is slowly being stricken from a massive redevelopment project that will welcome 30,000 new residents where Stapleton International Airport once stood.

Whether the cleansing is a bow to political correctness or justified payback to a politician who joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s remains open to debate.

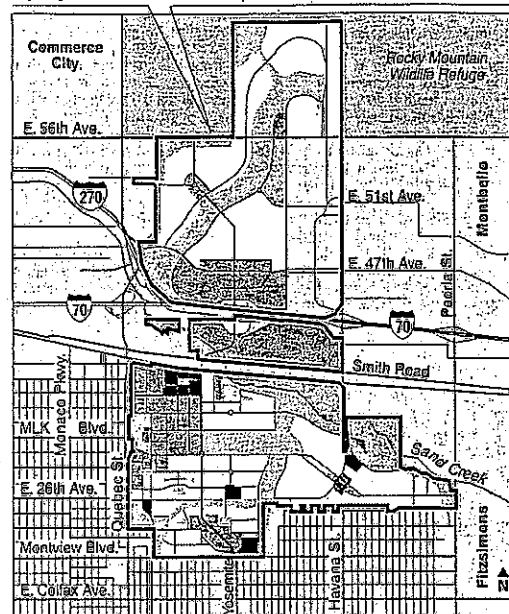
One prominent Denver historian called the move to excise the mayor's name from the 4,700-acre redevelopment site a whitewash that ignores Stapleton's good deeds for the city and minorities.

"We should not erase history," said Tom Noel, a historian and pro-

Please see NAME on 3B

What's in a name?

Forest City Enterprises has planned for years to phase out the name "Stapleton" at the airport redevelopment site. Former Denver mayor Benjamin Stapleton had political ties to the Ku Klux Klan when elected in 1923, and developers say they don't want to be associated with his checkered past.



Open space Residential Civic, transit-oriented
Town Center, mixed-use, regional retail, commercial, office, research and development

Source: Forest City Enterprises Denver Post 11-16-02 The Denver Post

Prof: 'We should not erase history'

NAME from Page 1B

fessor at the University of Colorado at Denver. "If one generation honors a mayor for his achievements, the next generation should not topple the statues."

The move to oust the Stapleton moniker began years ago, according to city leaders and members of the Stapleton Development Corp., a private nonprofit created by the city to oversee sale of the Stapleton land.

The precise genesis is unclear, but as the redevelopment project took hold in the 1990s, community rumblings over Stapleton's Klan links emerged.

The Stapleton Development Corp. researched the issue and agreed the ex-mayor had serious baggage.

"We verified what we were told (about Stapleton), and then the board began to diminish the name," said Dr. Paul Martin, chairman of the development corporation and senior pastor at Macedonia Baptist Church.

"That was a period of history that was very painful for people," Denver City Councilwoman Happy Haynes said, referring to the Klan era. "We talked to a number of elder statesmen in the African-American community, who remembered those days bitterly. Just the idea of him being associated with the Klan is offensive, and some people are offended by carrying the (Stapleton) name on the redevelopment."

Stapleton's ties to the KKK are well known. As with many politicians of the era, he joined the Klan before winning office in 1923. Nearly one out of 10 Coloradans belonged to the Klan at the time.

"He joined the Klan for support," Noel said. "They could throw an election."

Noel doubted that Stapleton embraced the KKK's racist philosophy and pointed out that the mayor rejected the group in 1925. Stapleton also worked on behalf of Jews and African-Americans, according to Noel.

Noel said Stapleton took steps to protect Benjamin Franklin Hooper, who owned the Ex-Servicemen's Club, a hotel that catered to African-Americans.

"He made sure Hooper was not closed down," Noel said.

The mayor also made sure African-American veterans of World War I marched in the Veterans' Day Parade. (They marched at the rear of the parade and had to carry fake, wooden rifles.)

Noel said it is wrong to "de-Stalinize" the former mayor.

Far better, he added, would be to include the man's complete legacy in the new housing and commercial development.

"To wipe out a person in light of the current political correctness is shortsighted," Noel said. "Some might want to remember the past and not forget that the Klan ruled Colorado."

The Stapleton logo is on display throughout the development and will remain in use for marketing purposes, Haynes said.

"For the foreseeable future, that still has to be there as a marketing tool to identify what we are talking about," Haynes said. "But it will be phased out as time goes on."

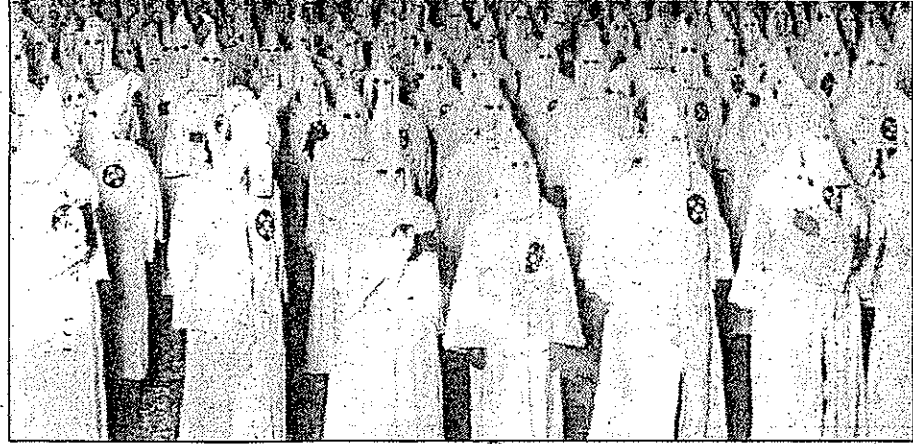
The name shame has forced the site's developer, Forest City Enterprises, to balance marketing needs and decades of name association against the community's desires to shed a clouded moniker.

The Stapleton name controversy has been discussed for 13 years, said Tom Gleason, spokesperson for Forest City. "The community at large is not united on this, but there are significant portions in the community that feel strongly about not having the name perpetuated."

The Stapleton name can be seen throughout the development site and at the area's visitor center. Meanwhile, Stapleton's name has been reduced to small type on the community's newsletter.

The Stapleton name will fade into history as new communities blossom and future residents baptize their neighborhoods.

"This is an extension of Denver neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods will develop their own names," Gleason said. "Over time, people will probably use the name Stapleton less and less. But you can't get away from that overnight."



11-3-03

Denver Post archives / International Newsreel

Interest in the Ku Klux Klan was revived by the 1915 movie "Birth of a Nation." In this 1923 photo, members of the Invisible Empire gather at Homestead, Fla.

Obliterating history

The decision has been made by the Stapleton Redevelopment Authority to downplay and eventually phase out the use of the Stapleton name, because Denver Mayor Ben Stapleton once courted and accepted political support from the Ku Klux Klan.

That misguided decision isn't likely to be affected by anything that is written in opposition, but it is certainly worth additional examination.

The authority doubtless has the power to do what it wants, but it doesn't have the power to alter history. It can print the name "Stapleton" in smaller type. It can discourage anyone from uttering the name. It can label specific development projects in a way that will lessen the use of the name but, happily, it cannot rewrite history. History is what happened, not what someone wishes had happened.

Councilwoman Happy Haynes, one of the chief sponsors of this plan, has said of the Stapleton name: "That name conjures up a painful past for some people that just won't fade away. This is a way to begin erasing history so the land can create its own history with these neighborhoods."

That statement is nonsensical. First, it suggests an importance for Stapleton that he did not have. Stapleton didn't characterize the age in the early 1920s when he rather briefly benefited from Klan support. Nor, need it be said, should history be "erased" in order to avoid a "painful past." Were this standard to be widely applied, and were everyone to have the rights of erasure claimed by Haynes, there would be no history worth reading.

The better course of action is to understand history. That, of course, takes more work than simply vilifying selected targets. For the record, Stapleton rejected the Klan about the time everyone else did and went on to help build Stapleton Field, later Stapleton International Airport, a project that served the city, the region and the nation for more than a half century.

Author Allen W. Trelease, in his book "White Terror," details the history of the Klan during Southern Reconstruction, but

also addresses the resurgence of the organization following World War I, the period of concern to Haynes.

Trelease cites the production of the film "Birth of a Nation" in 1915 as a major factor in forming favorable public attitudes about the Klan and points out that, for a time, the Klan was widely approved as a superpatriotic organization. In the early 1920s, when Stapleton first ran for mayor, the membership had mushroomed to be-

beyond what it had been during Reconstruction. The organization had a long list of hatreds, including Catholics, Jews, immigrants, radicals and organized labor.

Trelease points out, however, that, as early as 1890, there was a "marked tendency all around the country to repudiate the notion of racial equality in favor of a rejuvenated white supremacy." The much-criticized Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of the U.S. Supreme Court was handed down in that decade and, according to Trelease, "With few exceptions, white men North and South came

to the conclusion that if black men were not congenitally inferior, at least they were lower on the evolutionary ladder and full equality was something to be realized only in the dim future, if ever. ... More particularly, the nation as a whole acquiesced in the wholesale disfranchisement of black men in the South by a series of legal tricks circumventing the Fifteenth Amendment [right to vote] and the enactment of segregation or Jim Crow laws which evaded the Fourteenth [equal protection of the law]."

Did all of this constitute a "painful past?" You bet — but it is patently unfair to single out Ben Stapleton as though his actions during a brief period in his thoroughly productive life are all that now matter. He needn't be "erased" so "the land can create its own history."

Additions to history are quite natural. It is the subtractions from history that cause the problems.

Al Knight (alknight@mindspring.com) is a member of the Denver Post editorial board. His column appears Wednesday and Sunday.



Al Knight

Klan ties spur change

Late Mayor Stapleton's name eased out of project because of links to KKK

By Robert Sanchez
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Denver's massive Stapleton Redevelopment Project is quietly dropping the late mayor's name because of his political ties to the Ku Klux Klan eight decades ago.

Benjamin Stapleton's name has shrunk on signs and is being phased out of developments at the 4,700-acre site. The name already is gone from a community newsletter touting the property, the former home of the airport that bore the



Stapleton's presence will be gone eventually.

mayor's name.

"That name conjures up a painful past for some people that just won't fade away," said Denver City Councilwoman Happy Haynes, who helped push the changes. "This is a way to begin erasing history so the land can create its own history with these neighborhoods."

However, a friend of the Stapleton family said Ben Stapleton was "a great mayor" and did not deserve to be discredited all these years later.

The mayor died in 1950.

Supporters of diminishing the Stapleton name say it is a necessary atonement for a mayoral legacy that began with Klan backing in 1923.

But losing the name could be more difficult than simply shrinking a few signs.

For starters, the Stapleton site has been a part of Denver history since 1944, when the former Denver Municipal Airport was renamed in the mayor's honor.

Stapleton International Airport closed in 1994 to make room for Denver International Airport. With that change, the land began to take shape as a place of future homes, businesses, schools and parks.

It was widely acknowledged as a rare opportunity for a major city to redevelop a significant portion of its land mass.

The \$4 billion project, being built by Forest City Enterprises in partnership with the city, is considered a model of "urban regeneration" and won the prestigious Stockholm Partnerships for Sustainable Cities Award this summer. The Sta-

Flip to DEVELOPMENT on 14A

Development: Stapleton's name already vanishing

Continued from 5A

Stapleton redevelopment beat out 228 entries from 53 countries.

During the development process, several of the site's residential neighbors complained that the city venerated a man who solicited Klan support during his first run for office, officials said.

Meetings were convened. History books were searched.

"There's no doubt that Mayor Stapleton did wonderful things for the city, but then there's that chapter in his life where he was aligned with the Klan," said Alice Kelly, a Stapleton Redevelopment Authority board member who scoured records at Denver's Public Library. "Unfortunately, I think the Ku Klux Klan part will overshadow the mayor's life."

Those who knew Stapleton said the former mayor should be best known for backing the city's first airport, for paving roads and for surviving five terms in office.

Others argue that he represents a dark time in Denver's history, when Klan-supported candidates won city and state offices and burned crosses after their victories.

Sources are mixed over whether Stapleton was a member of the Klan.

At the minimum, the histories suggest, Stapleton asked Grand Dragon John Locke for KKK support. After his win in 1923, Stapleton appointed Klansmen as city police chief, city attorney and manager of safety.

Stapleton also hired at least seven Klansmen to be police sergeants and another 21 to become police officers, historical reports say.

A backlash against the Klan followed in 1925 and Stapleton rid himself of the Klan police officers. He began to distance himself from the group as the Klan fell out of favor with voters.

Stapleton eventually lost a re-election bid in 1931 but regained office in 1935.

He fought for the municipal airport, pushed for plans to conserve water and stayed in office until 1947, when he lost re-election to Quigg Newton.

"He probably listened to the Klan at first, but he was never a member," family friend Walter C. Emery, 84, said. "People loved him, he was a man who made things right."

"Ben Stapleton was a great mayor, and he certainly doesn't deserve to be discredited like this," Emery said. "It's awful."

Kelly admitted that "his family was hurt by this."

"His daughter-in-law was pretty sad that people feel this way," Kelly said of Katie Stapleton, who was unavailable for comment Monday.

After researching Benjamin Stapleton's life, the redevelopment board in October 2000 agreed to limit the former mayor's name on everything but official city marketing.

"That name is too important to lose at this time because it's a geographic locator for most people," said Tom Gleason a spokesman for the former international airport. "These are things that will have to happen over time, not all at once."

And changes are under way.

The Front Porch, the community newsletter, removed the name from

Denver Mayor Ben Stapleton

A chronology of his life and career

- **1869:** Born in Paintsville, Ky.
- **1890s:** Moves to Colorado.
- **1898:** Begins Army service in the Philippines as a first sergeant with the First Colorado Regiment.
- **1899:** Admitted to the Colorado Bar.
- **1904:** Becomes Denver's police magistrate.
- **1915:** President Wilson appoints Stapleton the city's postmaster.
- **1917:** Marries Mabel Freeland.
- **1923:** With help of Ku Klux Klan support, Stapleton defeats Dewey C. Bailey for Denver mayor.
- **1925:** Stapleton denounces Klan. KKK falls out of favor with Denver voters.
- **1927:** Re-elected mayor of Denver.
- **1929:** Denver Municipal Airport, Stapleton's brainchild, is dedicated.
- **1931:** Stapleton loses to George D. Begole, Denver's auditor.
- **1932:** Stapleton becomes Colorado's auditor.
- **1935:** Begole decides not to run for re-election. Stapleton wins election to resume his position as mayor.
- **1939:** Re-elected mayor.
- **1943:** Re-elected mayor.
- **1944:** Airport renamed in Stapleton's honor.
- **1947:** Stapleton finishes third in re-election bid. Quigg Newton becomes mayor.
- **1950:** Stapleton dies May 22 of a heart attack at his home. The former mayor is 80 years old.

Compiled by staff writer Robert Sanchez and News Librarian Carol Kasel

its banner.

Signs that once proudly proclaimed "Stapleton" now have that word in reduced type.

A new 77-acre commercial development was named Quebec Square at Stapleton. Another development is 29th Street Town Plaza at Stapleton.

Eventually, board member Paul Martin said, residents will shorthand the developments, calling them Quebec Square and Town Plaza.

The name Stapleton will disappear over time at the site, many said.

"What Mayor Stapleton did was ... unconscionable," said Haynes. "It speaks of his character that he later said he was wrong, but, by that time, it was too late."

Airbrushing Stapleton from our history

Friday 8-8-2002 2:00 PM

Are you disgusted by the way today's candidates pander to powerful interest groups? Well, get a grip. None of the pandering we've witnessed in recent elections comes close to the behavior of Ben Stapleton, who became Denver mayor in 1923 in part by cozying up to the Ku Klux Klan.

He did much worse than pander, actually. Once elected, Stapleton proceeded to appoint Klansmen to major public safety jobs and also to positions on the police force.

And nearly 80 years later, his misdeeds are coming back to undermine his legacy, thanks to a decision by the Stapleton Redevelopment Project. Slowly and methodically, project officials are dropping his name from the massive development at the site of the old Stapleton Airport. They simply don't think that a one-time friend of the Klan deserves such an honor.

We hold no brief for Stapleton, either, and agree that the redevelopment authority can strip his name from the project if it likes. The fact is that even Stapleton's most ardent defenders would be unable to claim that he was merely a creature of his times; being associated with the Klan was decidedly *not* the norm for 1923, and many of his contemporaries not only knew full well the pernicious nature of the group but said so as loudly as they could.

Stapleton himself probably knew better, too. After all, he shucked his Klan associations a couple of years later (albeit as its popularity fell) and went on to many accomplishments. They include, according to historian Tom Noel, promoting the interests of African-Americans

and Jews — both prime targets of the Klan, along with Catholics.

But even if we understand the redevelopment project's rationale for downplaying Stapleton, the decision still leaves us distinctly uneasy. After all, where precisely does the sanitizing of place names stop? How many historical figures could pass the modern test for political and social values?

It probably goes without saying that virtually no one born a very long time ago could pass such a test — save perhaps Francis of Assisi — no matter how distinguished he or she might have been in the culture of the time. But it doesn't end there, either. Even the names of figures much nearer to the modern era would have to be banished from public sight.

Could Lincoln, Jefferson, or Washington pass the test for contemporary social tolerance? No, no and no — and yet they are unarguably three of the greatest, and perhaps *the* three greatest, Americans who ever lived.

We're not suggesting that an historical figure's obnoxious behavior is irrelevant to whether we honor him today; we're simply saying that it should be put in the context of what else the person managed to say and do.

People like Hitler and Stalin are at one extreme of the spectrum, men who spent their entire careers engaged in nothing but murder and oppression. At the other end are figures like Jefferson, whose breathtaking contributions far outweigh his undeniable flaws.

Somewhere between the two groups is the tight wire between honor and disgrace — a tricky wire to navigate, as Ben Stapleton is discovering so belatedly.

Where precisely does the sanitizing of place names stop? How many historical figures could pass the modern test for political and social values?

Keep Stapleton name

Re: "In many eyes, Stapleton name no longer flies," Nov. 6 news story.

Political correctness has taken hold again with the news that the Stapleton development is losing its name because Mayor Benjamin Stapleton had ties to the Ku Klux Klan decades ago. Revisionist history is wrong; Mayor Stapleton is part of Denver's past; the airport that served this area for 70 years was named for him; and the name should remain for reasons of historical accuracy.

Let me turn the question back toward the PC zealots who insist on expunging Stapleton from our history: Exactly what historical connection does Martin Luther King Jr. have to Denver? If the street and library names honoring King are merely feel-good honorifics, then they should be removed instead — and those edifices renamed to reflect something or someone genuinely connected to Denver.

J. KIEL
Aurora

Denver Post 11-15-02