

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 191

Serving Chicago's legal community for 162 years

What's in a name in Chicago? Changing times, changing standards

Given the controversy over pulling down Confederate monuments, it was inevitable that Chicagoans would start thinking about the monuments in Chicago. After whom and what have we named our monuments, our parks and our schools? Why and how have we named them?

Most of the discussion has centered on the Balbo Monument at the south end of Grant Park near Balbo Drive. Today few people speak of Gen. Italo Balbo, who led a fleet of Italian Air Force seaplanes that landed in Lake Michigan during the Chicago World's Fair in the summer of 1933.

It was clearly a feat of daring and skill, and Chicago gave the Balbo expedition a true hero's welcome, even naming a nearby street Balbo Drive.

But Mussolini commemorated the event by sending an ancient Roman monument column to Chicago. The inscription says its a gift of "Fascist Italy, by command of Benito Mussolini ... in the eleventh year of the Fascist era."

Moreover, Balbo himself was a member of Mussolini's inner circle until Balbo's death in 1940. While he opposed some of Mussolini's policies, such as joining with Hitler's Germany and enacting anti-Semitic laws, he was definitely a leader of fascist Italy.

Over the years there have been discussions about removing the column and renaming Balbo Drive. Yet few people knew the name of the drive until August 1968 when Chicago police clashed with antiwar demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in what became known as "the battle of Balbo Drive." Even Chicagoans asked, "battle of what?"

Recently I've been thinking about Chicago names. So far as I can tell, there are few problems with Chicago public schools or libraries. The exception may be

Agassiz Elementary School in Lakeview, where the community is considering renaming the school because Louis Agassiz, although a great biologist, also held racist views. This is in keeping with the Chicago practice of community involvement in the naming of schools.

As to the parks, our four major parks are named after four U.S. presidents. Washington and Jackson were slaveholders, to be sure, but they are better-known for other deeds. Grant and Lincoln are Illinois' favorite sons. I do not know all of the names of the honorees for whom the "honorary streets" are named, but I doubt any of them is truly controversial. Many of those honored have connections with Chicago.

It seems to me that we should leave in place monuments that commemorate, but not necessarily honor or take a position on, some events. The Oak Woods Cemetery on 67th Street holds a mass grave of Confederate prisoners of war who died of privation at Camp Douglas during the Civil War.

Atop their burial mound is a statue of a Confederate soldier. Although the United Confederate Veterans designed the monument, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs administers the burial site. Why should we remove the statue

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and monument to dead Americans, whatever we may think of their cause?

Then there is the Haymarket Memorial. To this day, we do not know who threw the bomb on May 4, 1886, into the middle of a workers' gathering in support of an eight-hour workday, but it is clear that the "anarchists' trials"



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held afterwards were a travesty of justice.

Over a century later, a memorial was installed on Desplaines Street near the site of the gathering and bomb-throwing. The inscription notes the event; it does not take sides in the continuing historical controversy about who threw the bomb or why. Unquestionably, it commemorates a tragic event in Chicago and in international labor history. Not only Chicago history buffs, but visitors from around the world view the Haymarket Memorial in Chicago as a "must-see" site.

Industrial Workers of the World, Rotary International, The League of Women Voters and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, or CLUW, were founded in Chicago in 1905, 1905, 1920 and 1974, respectively. We know where, but only CLUW's founding is commemorated with a plaque.

The issues are more problematic when the monument in question appears to promote a specific ideology.

Back to Balbo.

The inscription on the Roman column is clearly a celebration of fascism as well as a commemoration of courage and skill. Given the controversy over the column, I fear that someone will deface it with graffiti. That happened to the Chicago Police Department's statue of a policeman at the Haymarket site until the department reinstalled it inside the police headquarters building.

Why not move the Balbo monument to a museum as part of an exhibit about the Chicago World's Fair? That would protect the monument and allow visitors to learn more about the historic flight in the context of the growth of fascism in the years leading up to World War II.

That leaves us with the name of the street. Here I am of two minds. We could leave it as Balbo Drive and put a plaque nearby describing the flight and landing without any reference to fascism or Mussolini. Or, we could rename it after someone else.

Some have suggested the names of two prominent Italian-born Chicagoans, Enrico Fermi and Mother Cabrini. Perhaps we should leave the issue of the name of the street to current public opinion. The community around the Agassiz School is providing an example of one way to address a naming issue.

Today's Chicagoans, after all, should have a voice in naming their monuments, schools and streets.