TO: Steve Ballard, Chancellor
FR: Gerald Prokopowicz, Professor of History
DATE: January 23, 2015
RE: Proposal to rename Aycock Hall

SITUATION

East Carolina University has a residence hall named for Charles B. Aycock, who was governor of North Carolina from 1901 to 1905. Aycock became known as the “Education Governor” for his dedication to public education, which included support for a state-funded teachers’ training school in Greenville that in time would grow to become East Carolina University. Unfortunately, Aycock was also an outspoken white supremacist, and at least part of his motivation for supporting public education was to insure that white residents could pass the literacy test that had been instituted to prevent black North Carolinians from voting. In late 2014 a committee was appointed to study a proposal to rename Aycock Hall. The proposal immediately sparked controversy, which continues today.

ARGUMENTS

For renaming:

Values

Supporters argue Aycock is not an appropriate representative of the values of East Carolina University. No one argues that East Carolina University in any way accepts the white supremacist view of Aycock’s era.

Action required

For ECU to do nothing, now that Aycock’s views on racial supremacy are receiving wide publicity, would be in effect a declaration of the institution’s indifference to its minority community, especially after Duke University has already removed Aycock’s name from one of its buildings, and other universities are reportedly contemplating similar action.

Against renaming:

Wishful thinking

Opponents of renaming offer a number of arguments. Some, such as the claim that Aycock was really a racial progressive by the standards of his day, or that everyone in Aycock’s era shared his racial views, are historically inaccurate and would make a poor basis for policy.
Tradition

Another argument for maintaining the status quo is that building names should not be changed too quickly, just because times have changed or new information has come to light. This however can perceived as another way of saying that Aycock’s racism shouldn’t be seen as truly evil. Penn State University couldn’t act quickly enough to remove Jerry Sandusky’s name from anything on its campus, and removed Joe Paterno’s statue as well, demonstrating that where there is consensus that a person has done something truly wrong, quick action is not only appropriate but mandatory. If evidence emerged showing that one of ECU’s later building namesakes had in fact been a Communist spy during the Cold War, how long would it take the Board of Trustees to remove that name?

Slippery slope

The most potent argument against renaming the building is the “slippery slope.” Aycock was not the only white North Carolinian of his day who openly endorsed white supremacy. Thomas Jarvis, for example, made no secret that he shared the prevailing view among white people of the early 20th century in North Carolina that black people should not be treated as political or social equals. If Aycock’s name must be removed, then by the same logic ECU will have to rename Jarvis Hall and a number of other buildings. Applied more broadly, the anti-Aycock position would ultimately require the renaming of anything anywhere named for George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, both slaveholders.

The extreme version of the “slippery slope” argument fails on historical grounds. Washington and Jefferson lived more than a century before Aycock, at a time when human slavery was widely accepted. They participated in the institution as slaveholders, but did nothing in particular to promote it, and in Jefferson’s case contributed to its destruction by planting the ideological seed of equality in the Declaration of Independence, and halting the spread of slavery out of the South by prohibiting it in the territories of the Northwest Ordinance. In contrast, Aycock and his contemporaries were not simply floating in a sea of assumed white supremacy like Washington or Jefferson; they were actively fighting the tide of equality by supporting laws to disenfranchise black men, decades after the Fifteenth Amendment gave all adult males the right to vote. Where Jefferson believed in theoretical equality and lamented the real state of society, Aycock and his peers believed in inequality, lamented the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments that tried to legislate equality, and worked hard to turn the clock back to a time before any black political rights existed. There is no hypocrisy in suggesting that people can continue to honor Washington and Jefferson while rejecting Charles B. Aycock.

The “slippery slope” argument is much stronger in regard to Jarvis and other contemporaries of Aycock. As research on Jarvis reveals, he shared Aycock’s political and racial views. If he did not do as much as Aycock to promote white supremacy in North Carolina, it was only because he did not hold as much political power during the heyday of the white supremacy
movement, from 1890 to 1916. If Aycock’s name were to be removed because he does not represent the current values of the institution, it would be difficult to justify keeping the name of Jarvis, and possibly others, on other buildings.

This argument carries still further. East Carolina Teachers Training School was chartered in 1907 “to train young white men and women” as an integral part of a political movement throughout North Carolina and the rest of the South that was aimed at eliminating black political power and restoring white political and social supremacy. As Aycock himself noted when the state began testing voters for literacy, it would be up to white voters to prove their “supremacy” by learning to read, so that only black voters would be disenfranchised. The institution we know as ECU was born at the outset of the Jim Crow era, with Jim Crow policies among the motivations of its founders.

POLICY OPTIONS

1. Do nothing

At one extreme, ECU could do nothing. As noted earlier, this would be perceived by many as a declaration of indifference toward minorities at ECU and throughout eastern North Carolina. It would reinforce the idea that tradition matters more than equality, and it would reaffirm the notion that history belongs to the majority, which gets to choose what to remember and celebrate (Aycock’s dedication to public education) and what to sweep under the rug and forget (Aycock’s racism). This policy would run counter to the intellectual foundations of the university as well as its current values of fairness, tolerance, and equal opportunity.

2. Change all names

At the other extreme, ECU could remove the names not just of Aycock and Jarvis but of all of its founders who participated in the widespread racism of their day, and who created this school to help maintain white political power by training teachers who would educate future white voters. This would essentially erase the names of the founders from the campus, much as leaders in the Soviet Union regularly ordered the names and pictures of historical figures erased from history books, to bring their version of the past into line with current policy. To pretend that the university had never been connected to Aycock and his generation would be just as anti-historical as pretending that Aycock was not a white supremacist.

3. Change only the name of Aycock Hall only

This option, which may appear to be a middle ground, runs the risk of starting on the slippery slope. It is hard to argue historically that there is any bright line between Aycock and Jarvis, and as research continues it is likely that others will be found who fall into the same category. Changing one name will upset the defenders of the status quo without satisfying all those who object to honoring known white supremacists. The action will draw attention in the
national media, and the controversy will almost certainly continue and intensify, making ultimate resolution more difficult.

4. Seize the opportunity

This is a divisive issue. There are strong arguments on both sides. As a parent, I would be uncomfortable paying room and board for my daughter to sleep in a building named for a prominent white supremacist; I can’t even imagine how much less comfortable a black parent would feel. At the same time, as a member of the ECU community, I would not be comfortable seeing the names of Aycock, Jarvis, and other founders swept away as though the only legacy they bequeathed to ECU was the racism of the early 20th century. If the university takes either course, it will inflame passions on the other side, and open new wounds instead of healing old ones.

What is needed is a bold, comprehensive course of action that will allow all of us at ECU to confront and come to terms with our institution’s past. Consider the metaphor of an ancestor that you never met, but whose name you bear. Your ancestor is well known locally for many civic deeds. You grow up revering your ancestor, proud to have “III” after your name. One day, however, you hear a story told about your ancestor, and you go to the internet and the library to do some research. You find the truth—that your ancestor once participated in a terrible act, along with others in the community. What do you do? Do you change your name? Run from the community in shame for an act you didn’t commit? Forget about all the good your ancestor did? Or do you resolve to wipe away the stain? To continue to revere the memory of all the good your ancestor did, while using the memory of evil deeds as a constant inspiration to repair the damage and to make the world a better place?

This is where we find ourselves as an institution. We can no longer pretend not to know the totality of Aycock, Jarvis, and others, and we cannot accept association with their values of racial inequality and oppression. But we cannot pretend that they were not our founders either. What we can do is to continue to value the good things they did while rejecting their racism.

If history teaches one thing, it is that human actions have unpredictable consequences. Often good intentions lead to bad consequences. Sometimes, however, it works the other way around. The founders of East Carolina Teachers Training School may have thought they were building a foundation for white supremacy, but they instead they were unknowingly planting the seed of a great university, dedicated to equal opportunity for all people. We can celebrate them for what they did, not what they thought they were doing.
ACTIONS

How can ECU do this?

1. Educate

- Conduct panels and programs where faculty experts share their knowledge of ECU’s past. Historians would play a major role, but political scientists, geographers, sociologists and other faculty would contribute. The History Department, in conjunction with Sociology and Geography, is currently prepared to conduct such an event and is awaiting administrative approval.

- Add three hours of lecture and other instruction on ECU history to the curriculum COAD 1000, to be taught to every section by History faculty or by instructors trained by History faculty.

- Encourage students to take HIST 3907 “Pirate Nation: An ECU History.”

- Offer one lecture each year, from one of the existing lecture series on campus, on a topic related to ECU’s history.

- Expand the brief (and sometimes misleading) sentences on the ECU student housing websites for each residence hall with more detailed and accurate information about their namesakes. Create a separate central web page with similar information for all the buildings on campus.

2. Commemorate

- Announce a comprehensive renaming initiative, affecting buildings named for Aycock, Jarvis and selected others. The boldest step would be simply to take the names down (to be commemorated elsewhere; see below), and perhaps use the naming opportunities to raise funds from donors (a suggestions beyond my pay grade). An alternative would be to find names representing other eras and other values from North Carolina and ECU history, and pair them with existing names, e.g. Jarvis Hall could become Holden & Jarvis Hall, honoring Gov. William Woods Holden who battled the Ku Klux Klan in 1870 and was impeached for his efforts.

- In each building on campus, install a prominent cased exhibit near the entrance that portrays the history of the building and the person for whom it is named. Note that ECU, alone among UNC system campuses, has no museum of its own (other than the Country Doctor Museum, in Bailey) where students can learn of their school’s past.

- Commission a Founders’ Monument on the Mall, to be designed by ECU art faculty, that reflects the paradox of a great institution rising from a mixture of good and evil
motives. The monument will honor the achievement of the founders while simultaneously exposing the racial inequality of the world in which they lived. I have no idea how that might be done, but I have confidence in our talented faculty.

- Endow a scholarship for minority students named for Charles B. Aycock. It will serve as a constant reminder that the university continues to carry on Aycock’s belief in education while rejecting his racism. This should be a highly competitive scholarship, awarded only to the most capable and mature students, because the winners of the Aycock Scholarship will carry a special burden as living symbols of the emptiness of Aycock’s belief that one race was inferior to another.

3. Celebrate

- Revise the annual Founders’ Day celebration to include recognition of the victims of the racist ideology that suffused the lives of Aycock, Jarvis and other founders, and acknowledge that we reject their racial views even as we celebrate their other accomplishments. Expand the definition of “founders” to include those who pioneered the integration of ECU.

- Create an annual day of remembrance, celebration, and purgation, where students engage in some kind of activity that symbolically purges the institution of the negative side of its heritage, something like Guy Fawkes Day in England, but without the bonfires. Perhaps it could be worked into the popular Polar Bear Plunge every January, washing away what we don’t want to keep from the past and exhilarating in our common identity as shivering Pirates. Schedule the event at a time when students and faculty are free to participate (not just before final exams like Founders Day).

CONCLUSION

ECU has been given a rare opportunity to come to terms with its own past. Looking into our institutional closet and seeing the skeletons of past racism will not be pleasant, and many people will not want to do it. The letters page and “Bless Your Heart” section of the Daily Reflector as well as the Pirate Rants section of The East Carolinian regularly express discomfort at the idea of changing names of buildings.

The problem is that the reality of Aycock’s racism can’t be changed, either by telling people they shouldn’t care about it, or by removing his and others’ names and denying that they were integral to our founding. Since the reality won’t go away, the only long-term solution is to face it, to recognize who our founders were, to continue to embrace their good deeds, to confess that racism was among their motivations, to celebrate how far we have come from their day, and to dedicate ourselves to advancing farther still.