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FEATURED

Efforts to rename Sibley Park gains traction

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Nov 9, 2020



Jameel Haque, director of the Kessel Peace Institute at Minnesota State University, has been speaking to local groups over the past month to make a case for why Sibley Park should be renamed.

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MANKATO — The name of Sibley Park and whether it should be changed is part of an ongoing debate, and efforts to rename the park are gaining momentum.

A group of community members is working to change the park's name because of Henry Sibley's role in events surrounding the U.S. Dakota War, including the hanging of the 38 Dakota men in 1862.

The group of 15 is trying to raise awareness about the harm done by Sibley to Dakota people and continue the conversation about Sibley's legacy in Mankato.

Jameel Haque is the unofficial face of the movement. The director of the Kessel Peace Institute and history professor at Minnesota State University began these efforts earlier this year.

He felt motivated to do something after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and working to change the name of Sibley Park seemed like a way to make Mankato a more welcoming community.

Haque has been speaking to local groups during the past month to make a case for why the park should be renamed.

While there is no set timeline, Haque plans to bring a proposal to the City Council, potentially next year. But before doing so, he wants to ensure the suggestions brought forward is what the community wants.

The movement has garnered quite a bit of support, his most recent virtual presentation had about 20 people attend.

Sibley has a mixed legacy. He was a fur trader and the first governor of Minnesota. He also played a prominent role in the signing of a treaty that misled the Dakota about how much payment they'd receive in exchange for their land. The treaty sparked events such as the delayed shipment of food and supplies to the Dakota that led up to the U.S.-Dakota War more than a decade later.

Sibley commanded troops during the war and afterward oversaw rushed mass trials of 392 Dakota. Some trials lasted only five minutes and the Dakota men were not allowed lawyers or witnesses. The trials resulted in 303 men being sentenced to death. After Lincoln and his government reviewed the cases, 38 Dakota men were hanged.

Sibley Park, home today to a farm-themed playground and the annual Kiwanis Holiday Lights event, was the site of a prison camp for the Dakota men awaiting a mass trial following the war.

Advocates for renaming the park say changing the name of the park is a step toward reconciliation for the damage done to Dakota people by Sibley.

“Renaming the park will help people know that we as a town have a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion,” Haque said. He hopes changing the park’s name will make Mankato a more welcoming community.

Feedback on the renaming has been mixed. While some think it is a step to repair harm, there is pushback from people who criticize the movement of applying 21st century standards to actions by a man more than 150 years ago. They worry changing the name of the park is an attempt to rewrite history, which Haque disagrees with.

“History is a conglomeration of stories society tells itself to reveal what it prioritizes in the past and how it wants to move forward in the future,” he said in a virtual presentation to community members last month. “History is a mirror of what we value now. Do we value Sibley’s role as the mediocre first governor of Minnesota over his role in the Dakota War?”

After attending one of Haque’s presentations, Barbara Keating of Mankato said she doesn’t want to be too quick to throw out Sibley because he did good for Minnesota too. For now she is neutral on whether the park name should be changed and recommends a group of people study the issue and learn more about Sibley before a decision is made.

Some oppose the renaming and argue the name should stay because Sibley was a prominent political figure during the beginning of Minnesota statehood.

Curtis Dahlin, a self-described independent historian, thinks the renaming effort highlights an incomplete picture of who Sibley was. To Dahlin, Sibley helped protect Dakota people from angry white settlers while they were held in prison camps and he prevented more deaths. Dahlin thinks it is inaccurate to only show Sibley in a negative light.

Haque said he’s surprised by how much pushback the movement has received. He has seen people criticize the movement on Facebook and has received letters disagreeing with his efforts. A lively discussion broke out during one of Haque’s presentations last month over what kind of man Sibley was.

As a potential alternative to renaming, Haque also suggests installing a monument in the park that acknowledges the history of events around the war and injury caused by Sibley’s actions.

The conversation around renaming the park is not new. The podcast “This American Life” recorded an episode about the U.S. Dakota War called “Little War on the Prairie” in 2012 and brought up the idea of changing the park’s name.

There have been community meetings to discuss the topic. A demonstration calling attention to the harm done by Sibley was held during the annual Kiwanis Holiday Lights display in 2018.

When Haque became involved in renaming efforts earlier this year, he found that previous efforts had mostly fizzled out. He discovered a community of people though eager to help move the process forward.

Haque connected with people like Megan Schnitker, chair of the Indigenous Peoples’ Day committee who has been pushing for the park’s name to be changed. Other people reached out to Haque after hearing about his work, asking to help.

While the movement is gaining momentum, the timeline around when and how the park would be renamed is unclear. Haque plans to take the time necessary to inform the community and gather input before bringing the proposal to the City Council.

Even after reaching out to the council, a path to officially changing the park’s name is hazy because a park has not been renamed in Mankato in recent memory.

City Manager Pat Hengtes said there are multiple ways the park name could be changed. After the committee brings forward reasoning and suggestions for renaming the park, the council could decide whether or not to change the name.

The council also could recommend a process, such as a vote or formal poll, to determine what the community wants.

As Haque and others work to rename Sibley Park, there are other efforts in the state to potentially remove Sibley’s name from another entity.

The West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan school district is reconsidering the name of Henry Sibley High School. The School Board recently decided to gather feedback from American Indian families and historians for further discussion on whether the school’s name should be changed, the Star Tribune reported.

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