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## *History never dies*

### **Park name forced neighbors, American Indians back to 1812**

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**By MICAH MAIDENBERG**

*Editor*



John Low, executive director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, Col. Thomas Purple Jr., commander of a South Loop-based Illinois National Guard brigade and Tina Feldstein, president of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance, were among those who worked collaboratively to name a park at 18th and Calumet.

FRANK PINC/Staff Photographer

Mark Kieras was drawn to purchase a home in the Prairie District six years ago because of its past. Prairie Avenue south of 18th Street still featured some of the mansions inhabited by turn-of-the-century captains of industry and was lined by graceful, mature trees. Kieras liked that. His new environment inspired the real estate agent to start reading local histories.

He came to learn about the Battle of Fort Dearborn. “This site at 18th and Calumet kept coming up. I kept reading — it was referenced four, five, six times. This is pretty

significant here,” he said of the intersection, the approximate place of an Aug. 15, 1812, fight between American soldiers and hundreds of American Indians.

The battle, as described by author and historian Jerry Crimmins, is one of those foundational stories from Chicago’s early history. With the War of 1812 underway, Crimmins explained, the American commander of an American fort in Detroit ordered Fort Dearborn — located at what’s now Michigan and Wacker — evacuated.

All 54 soldiers, along with militiamen, women and kids left for Fort Wayne, in Indiana, the morning of Aug. 15. The band walked south along the lake. Around 18th street the American Indians attacked, Crimmins said. The soldiers charged west after them, but were surrounded and killed. It was a bloody episode. In all, 27 soldiers were killed during the battle and its aftermath, along with 12 children, 11 militia and two women. Up to 15 Indians died.

In more recent times, the spot was used as a developer’s sales trailer. Once the condo transactions were complete, green space was created, and a placeholder name — Columbia Park — selected until a permanent designation could be chosen.

Kieras wanted the park to reflect the stories of its past. On Feb. 21, 2006, he wrote his first letter to the park district, asking that the district tip its hat to the Fort Dearborn battle.

Tina Feldstein, president of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance, said the park district originally wanted to name the space after Harriet Monroe, a poetess who once lived in the area. But Kieras thought the battle need commemoration.

“It was really Mark Kieras who came to us,” Feldstein said. “He was like, ‘This is our opportunity to finally name it and pay honor to the site itself for what it is, the site of the Battle of Fort Dearborn.’”

So the group, Feldstein said, decided to push for naming the park after Black Partridge, a Potawatomi who appears in a statue commissioned by George Pullman, the powerful

industrialist who once owned the land in question. The statue depicts Black Partridge preventing another American Indian from tomahawking a white female settler during the Fort Dearborn battle. The city has the statue in storage.

“At the time, the interpretation was Black Partridge was a great leader of the Potawatomi. The context was he was a very honorable man, and the Native Americans could be very proud of Black Partridge,” Feldstein said. PDNA hope to return the statue, a piece similar in scale to the behemoths seen in Grant and Lincoln parks, to the neighborhood park.

The debate changed, however, after the Chicago Reader published a piece in March 2007 about the Black Partridge proposal. The Reader found that Joe Podlasek, executive director of the American Indian Center in Uptown, opposed to bringing the statue out of storage and was unsure about the Black Partridge name.

John Low, a Potawatomi and executive director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian in Evanston, then wrote a letter to the paper, asking why his tribe, which figured in the 1812 battle and remains active in Michigan and Wisconsin, wasn't consulted about the park naming.

Low got two surprises.

“One, they printed my response. And two, Mark Kieras responded with, ‘Well, let's talk. We should talk about this,’” Low said. “That was the big surprise about this. I thought he'd respond and I'd respond and then whatever happened was going to happen. We began a conversation.”

Over the next year, representatives from PDNA, the American Indian Center, the Glessner House and the Mitchell Museum discussed possible names. Participants said Ald. Robert Fioretti (2nd), who was relatively new in office when the controversy broke, pushed for a consensus, and the Battle of Fort Dearborn Park name was chosen.

The Illinois National Guard even got involved. The guard has a command at 19th and Calumet, a block south of the new park.

“We keep Fort Dearborn in reverence, I guess,” said deputy brigade commander Thomas Purple, noting the militiamen who died in the fight. “If you look at the state headquarters unit crest, it’s Fort Dearborn on there. It’s kind of the beginning of the Illinois Militia and the beginning of the Illinois National Guard.”

An important part of reaching consensus was PDNA’s agreeing to drop its push to get the statue out of storage and placed again at the site. Feldstein said community members shifted their perspective during talks about the name. “We really didn’t understand it had such a heavy context for the Native Americans at all,” she said.

The statue had been previously installed in what’s now Women’s Park and in the Chicago History Museum.

Low called it maudlin and over the top, a stereotypical depiction of American Indians that groups like his have combated for years. Joe Podlasek, from the AIC, said the statue didn’t reflect the nuances of history.

On Aug. 15, all the parties involved in the naming will inaugurate the new park — 197 years from the date of the incident which gives its new name. An Illinois state historic marker is planned, and educational programming is possible.

Low said the park, to him, represents a time of “conflict and contact” between different peoples. But it won’t always necessarily be that way.

“This space has existed for millions of years before that day and it’ll exist hopefully for millions of years after that day,” he said. “I think what has become now is very appropriate. It’s a place for people to come, reflect, relax, have some space to enjoy the outdoors, to enjoy what the creator gives us. That’s what the space reflects to me now.”

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