

Site of Chicago's Ft. Dearborn Massacre to be called 'Battle of Ft. Dearborn Park'

Chicago Park District braved skirmishes of its own over the name

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By **Ron Grossman** Tribune reporter

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A tragic chapter in Windy City history known to generations of schoolchildren as "The Ft. Dearborn Massacre" will be renamed by the **Chicago Park District** on Saturday.

With a military honor guard and Native American dancers, a patch of green at 18th Street and Calumet Avenue is to be dedicated the "Battle of Ft. Dearborn Park."

That apparent nod to political correctness won't go down well with many Chicagoans who, from bar stools to seminar tables, cherish their city's legend and lore.

"It's not to say there wasn't a massacre, but we wanted to provide a vehicle for people to come together," said Tina Feldstein, president of Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance the ceremony's host.

Call it what you will, what occurred there on Aug. 15, 1812, was no picnic. Now, it's a pleasant spot for alfresco dining in a gentrifying neighborhood, but 197 years ago, it was a place of bloodshed.

The U.S. and England had gone to war a second time, and a party of soldiers and pioneer Chicagoans evacuated Ft. Dearborn, then on the country's western frontier. Having reached the site of Saturday's festivities, they were ambushed by 500 Potawatomi warriors. Two-thirds of the Ft. Dearborn group were killed -- 61 to 63 men, women and children. So, too, were 15 Indians.

It is often said that history is written by the victors. But it's tricky to apply that aphorism to the battle over what to call the Battle/Massacre of 1812.

The Indians won the encounter, taking survivors into captivity, later selling them to the British, and burning Ft. Dearborn. But their victory only quickened the U.S. government's efforts to evict the tribes from their villages and hunting grounds. By 1833, the year Chicago was incorporated as a town, the Indians had been removed from its vicinity, noted Russell Lewis, chief historian of the Chicago History Museum.

So it's not surprising there's more than one collective memory of the event -- as Feldstein's group discovered when it set out to name the park a couple of years ago.

John Low, a member of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi and director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, in **Evanston**, saluted the winning choice as evenhanded, not "casting the parties as victims or victors, villains or heroes."

The naming contest began a couple of years ago, when a resident of the **Near South Side** neighborhood suggested the park be named for Black Partridge. That would have been both neutral and appropriate, according to Jerry Crimmins, author of the historical novel "Fort Dearborn." Black Partridge was an Indian who warned the soldiers and settlers of an impending attack, urging them not to retreat from the fort, as they had been ordered. He accompanied the Ft. Dearborn group on its ill-fated journey, protecting a white woman from attackers.

"He tried to prevent the conflict," Crimmins said. "Black Partridge should be a hero to both sides."

When Black Partridge was nominated, someone recalled that a statue honoring him used to stand near the site of the encounter, suggesting it be re-installed at the new park. First, though, the neighborhood group had to get the local alderman to sign off on the proposed name.

Technically, the Park District chooses. But in Chicago-style politics, an alderman is, so to speak, the Great White Father of his ward.

"When they brought the name to me, my question was: 'Can you get the Indian tribes to agree?' " said Ald. Robert Fioretti (2nd). "I said: 'I doubt you can.' "

That was a pretty good guess -- given what had happened to the Black Partridge sculpture.

The statue -- depicting Black Partridge shielding a white woman from another Indian's tomahawk -- was commissioned by railroad-car magnate **George Pullman**, whose estate was near the site of the encounter. The statue stood there from 1893 to 1931, then was installed in the lobby of the Chicago Historical

Society. In the 1970s, Native Americans protested its display.

"From their perspective, Black Partridge was a traitor," said James Grossman, co-editor of "The Encyclopedia of Chicago."

In the 1980s, the statue was acquired by the city, which moved it back to the neighborhood when the Prairie Avenue community began to be revitalized in the 1990s. Subsequently, it was again removed and placed in city storage, ostensibly to conserve it, where it remains.

The alderman's warning came true: Naming the park for Black Partridge was vetoed by various Native American organizations, including the American Indian Center. Once Black Partridge was out of the running, "Ft. Dearborn Massacre," wasn't a viable candidate.

" 'Massacre' is such a judgmental word," Low said. "We discussed how, from another perspective, you might call it 'Victory Park.' "

Feldstein recalled the delicate negotiations it took to find a compromise acceptable to all parties.

"I got an unbelievable history lesson," she said

Others are less sure of what the lesson is. Grossman is pleased with the name change, from massacre to battle. He thinks it corrects a bias in the story of how the West was won -- and lost.

"If you look at standard texts, when the Indians win, it's a massacre," Grossman said. "But when the Americans win, it's a battle."

But Crimmins is troubled by the snub to Black Partridge -- and Chicago history, as he sees it.

"Historical revisionism typically takes heroes from the past and makes villains of them," Crimmins said. "As long as I write about it, I'm going to call it the Ft. Dearborn Massacre."

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