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News

One final battle resolved at Fort Dearborn Park



By Miriam Y. Cintrón | *September 2009*

Last month, residents of the historic Prairie Avenue District and local officials joined by War of 1812 reenactors and Native Americans in full headdresses and traditional native clothing gathered at a small park at 18th Street and Calumet Avenue to dedicate and name the site the Battle of Fort Dearborn Park.

Surrounded by new condo developments and highrises, the small patch of land is the approximate location of the event formerly known as the Fort Dearborn Massacre, which took place 197 years ago as the War of 1812 raged on between American and British soldiers.

During the dedication, Potawatomi elder Roger Williams blessed the site. To commemorate its history, an Illinois National Guard honor guard presented the colors, and ritual performers offered traditional Native American singing, drumming, and dancing.

The park's new name reflects the events of Aug. 15, 1812, when more than 100 American pioneers and soldiers evacuated Fort Dearborn (at what is now the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive) and headed south toward Indiana. They traveled nearly two miles south along the lakefront before being attacked by a group of about 500 Potawatomi and Ottawa Indians. The fight led to the deaths of 60 pioneers, including women and children; the

imprisonment of others; and the deaths of 15 Native Americans.

The switch from calling the event a “massacre” to a “battle” likely will stir controversy, given the circumstances, but evolving views of history often meet opposition before being accepted.



Native Americans in traditional clothing helped dedicate the Battle of Fort Dearborn Park. (Photo by Troy T Heinzeroth)

Russell Lewis, executive vice president and chief historian of the Chicago History Museum, pointed out that the son of a Potawatomi who participated in the event criticized the event being called a massacre, saying, “When whites are killed, it is a massacre; when Indians are killed, it is a fight.” The new name was chosen to recognize that lives were lost on both sides and reflect the complex nature of the overall war, with Native Americans and early pioneers battling over restraining or advancing westward expansion, respectively.

The park “memorializes an event that reminds us that early contacts between non-natives and natives on this continent were often difficult and that, rather than casting the parties as victims or victors, villains or heroes, it acknowledges that these were people first, often presented with difficult circumstances and choices,” said John Low, a member of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi and executive director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. “As much as this place was once a place of conflict, it now represents collaboration and reconciliation.”

Second Ward Alderman Robert Fioretti noted the dedication day focused on unity and healing, and Williams said the City’s invitation to the Potawatomi to join the dedication “completed the circle” linking the past and the present.

Black Partridge name, statue scrapped

The Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance (PDNA) played an active role in linking the park with its past and commemorating its historical significance. During the planning process, participants decided against naming the site after Potawatomi chief Black Partridge, who warned the soldiers and pioneers about the planned attack.

They also vetoed reinstalling a controversial statue depicting the events of that fateful day. Commissioned in the 19th century by railroad car manufacturer George Pullman, the sculpture is called The Fort Dearborn Massacre: Black Partridge Saving Mrs. Helm and features Black

Partridge saving a white female settler from a Native American armed with a tomahawk.

On the other side of the statue, a Native American is driving a spear through a man nearly collapsed on the ground.

The 116-year-old statue carries its own interesting and controversial history, having been put into storage during the 1970s after local Native Americans protested its presence at the Chicago History Museum (then known as the Chicago Historical Society).

The American Indian Center supported naming the park after Black Partridge but opposed the statue, as did Fioretti. The statue “doesn’t symbolize how people can come together,” he said, noting it “portrays Native Americans in the wrong light.”

Statue or no, the newly dedicated park, with its new marker detailing the battle, will serve as an opportunity to teach residents about an important part of Chicago history.

“This is our neighborhood, and now we have an opportunity to talk a little deeper about our history,” said Tina Feldstein, PDNA president.

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