

# The Business

[thebusiness@chicagoreader.com](mailto:thebusiness@chicagoreader.com)



Mark Kieras in the park where he hopes The Fort Dearborn Massacre (above) will be reinstated

Paul L. Merideth (Kieras); Chicago History Museum

## Blood on the Ground

Neighbors who want the Fort Dearborn massacre monument returned to its site are

likely to face a battle.

**By Deanna Isaacs**

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**IF YOU KNOW** what happened at the corner of 18th and Calumet 200 years ago, it's an amazing thing just to touch the ground there. This dollop of land, bordered by new brick townhomes, a massive glass-and-steel condo building, and a brick wall, was the site of the Fort Dearborn massacre. On the morning of August 15, 1812, with the nation at war with Britain and its Native American allies, 95 people—mostly soldiers but also settlers, including women and children—left the fort at what is now Michigan and Wacker and began marching to Fort Wayne. Following orders to evacuate, they'd supposedly struck a deal for safe passage, but when they reached this spot Captain William Wells, leading the way, spotted Indians behind the dunes and warned the commanding officer they were about to be ambushed. Taking the offensive, the troops broke from the caravan and attacked, setting off a bloody free-for-all. Massively outnumbered, more than half the U.S. soldiers and their charges were shot, stabbed, or hacked to death; most of the rest were taken prisoner. But the wife of one officer, Margaret Helm, was spared when a Potawatomi chief, Black Partridge, snatched her from beneath a tomahawk and helped her get to the lake, where she, and a few others, according to some reports, escaped by boat.

That, with various embellishments—like the excision and consumption of Captain V heart—is the story as it's been told ever since, at least by the white man. And it's that account that captivated real estate agent Mark Kieras when he moved to the neighborhood four years ago. Kieras had heard rumors that the site was about to become a condo sales center and contacted the Park District to protest; he found to his relief that the property was a dedicated but as-yet unnamed park. Thinking its mo

should honor the spot's history, he began researching and learned that in 1893 George Pullman had erected a massive statue portraying Helm's rescue on the massacre site, which then became a tourist attraction complete with picture postcards. In 1931 the monument was moved to the Chicago Historical Society, and in the 1980s it was relocated again, to the park behind the landmark Clarke House. Sometime after the need of repairs, it was banished to a warehouse.

Looking at photos, Kieras became convinced the statue should be returned to its original location. Created by Danish sculptor Carl Rohlf-Smith, the nine-foot-tall bronze includes six figures. On one side, Black Partridge stands with arm raised to stave off a dead blow a young warrior is about to deliver to Margaret Helm, who has a baby at her feet. On the other, a warrior kneels astride a downed man and drives a spear into his chest. ("Undoubtedly an anachronism," sniffed the *Chicago Tribune* in 1892 about the scene while noting that "Kicking Bear, the hostile Sioux who was a prisoner at Fort Sheridan last summer, posed for the figure of Black Partridge.") The original ten-foot granite pedestal, which contained bas-reliefs portraying more of the story, is reportedly missing.

Kieras began surveying neighbors about a park name and submitted a few suggestions to the Park District. He says he got back a letter saying, "Thanks, our historians have been researching this for a year, and we are leaning toward naming it Harriet Monument Park." According to Kieras, the Park District explained that the Poetry magazine foundation lived at 22nd and Michigan and that they were "trying to name parks after women." He was also told the Poetry Foundation would be making "a substantial contribution for park upgrades." After that, Kieras says, the neighbors met and considered a compromise, though he and other local history buffs, like sociologist Robert Engler, continued to argue that only a name that recognized the compelling heritage of the place would be right.

Eventually there was consensus on this point.

“It’s an ugly event in history, and there’s two sides to the story,” Kieras says. “But the most significant and first recorded event in this area.” He says the neighborhood group thought they could focus on the positive, life-saving aspect of the story, and serious consideration to “Rescue Park” before making their final decision. Last week Kieras appeared before a Park District board meeting on behalf of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance and officially proposed the name “Black Partridge Park.” This week he and other PDNA members were scheduled to see the statue, now being stored by the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs, at its undisclosed warehouse location. Preservation Chicago has joined them in calling for its return to the park.

“At first I thought raising the money for repairs would be the most difficult part,” Kieras says. “I’m not looking for the Park District to fund it.” But in this hot neighborhood funding is there—if not from foundations, then developers. Now Kieras sees that getting the park properly named (“Why get the statue back for Harriet Monroe?”) is only the first step in a process more complicated than he imagined. If the name and repair of the statue both happen, there would still be questions of exactly where to place the memorial and how to provide for maintenance. But the greatest potential problem is public reaction, especially from the Native American community, which may object to the depiction of the Indians as aggressors. Kieras says his committee is hoping it won’t be an issue. The monument was vandalized when it was on public display, he says “I think people are more open today. To me this is history—it needs to be brought back for discussion.”

The day after he took the Black Partridge name to the Park Board, Kieras placed a call to Joseph Podlasek, director of Chicago’s American Indian Center. “Hopefully they’ll be interested in having it too,” Kieras says. “We feel if we get their support, it’ll be a slam dunk.”

That doesn't seem likely. After getting a look at a photo of the statue this week, Podlasek said the name for the park might be OK (though he'd have to see the res to be sure), but they'd need a different piece of art. "This is clearly the image that elders had removed from the Chicago Historical Society many years ago," he said. will not support this coming out of storage. Ever."

### **Investing in the Future**

The Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance has learned that the [National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum](#) received a \$20,000 contribution on behalf of Black Orchid nightclub owner Marc Curtis last November while the museum was considering bids including one by a Black Orchid group—to buy its building. In addition, PDNA says heard last week that same group has given the museum a \$60,000 operating loan the deal is pending. NVVAM treasurer Jim Holtzman confirms. "They really want to part of this building," he says. **Я**