



DRAFT FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS

TO: HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

FROM: KATIE FRANKS
DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST

CC: RICK SEPLER, AICP
PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: PICKETT BRIDGE (A.K.A. DUPONT STREET BRIDGE) RENAMING RECOMMENDATION
HPC APPLICATION NUMBER: HIS2019-0001

DATE: OCTOBER 10, 2019

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

On Monday August 14, 2017, in light of the violent clash in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12 between a group identified as white supremacist and counter-protesters, the City of Bellingham removed signs identifying the "Pickett Bridge" at Prospect and Dupont streets. On August 18, 2017, the Mayor's Office issued a statement that the Pickett Bridge signs would be removed until further notice, and that the Mayor would work with City Council and the Historic Preservation Commission regarding next steps.

Following this action, City Council requested that staff look into the possible renaming of the Pickett Bridge, in coordination with the Historic Preservation Commission and other local stakeholders. Some members of the community had expressed concerns that the designation was not truly historical, and that it honored a military leader for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Captain George E. Pickett was a U.S. Army officer who was stationed in Bellingham during the 1850s, supervising the construction of Fort Bellingham as well as that of the first bridge across Whatcom Creek – also referred to as the "Military Road Bridge." Pickett left the area in 1861 to fight for the Confederacy in his home state of Virginia in the Civil War.

Bellingham City Council members acknowledged local citizens and Western Washington University students who were uncomfortable with a local landmark named in honor of a military leader who served during a war marked as "a pinnacle of America's racist history."

"Bellingham does not tolerate hate speech, white supremacy or the neo-Nazi movement," Mayor Kelli Linville asserted at that time. "We have heard reports of local businesses being vandalized with swastikas and hate speech. This is unacceptable. We are a city committed to civil rights for all people, and we need to stand up to hate and take steps towards healing our country and our communities."

It was determined that until the Council took final action, the Pickett Bridge sign would remain down.

After the sign was removed from the bridge, on September 11, 2017, City Council voted to bring the following tasks to the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) for discussion and recommendation:

1. Engage the community
2. Research the history of the bridge
3. Present findings to Council and the Mayor at a later meeting

Planning and Community Development Department (PCDD) workloads delayed this issue from being brought forward for consideration by the HPC until now.

ROLE OF THE COMMISSION

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) has been directed by the City Council to make a formal recommendation regarding whether the bridge over Whatcom Creek on Dupont Street, honorarily named the “Pickett Bridge” in 1918, should be renamed, as it is asserted that it honors a leader of the Confederate Army.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Over the last two years precedent has been set for renaming / removing these types of monuments and markers. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) 2019 publication *“Whose Heritage: Public symbols of the Confederacy”* provides background and methodology to help communities across the country, recommending that they reflect on the true meaning of these symbols and ask the questions: **whose heritage do the symbols truly represent, and does the tribute specifically honor an aspect of the person’s Civil War life.**¹
2. The *“Whose Heritage: Public symbols of the Confederacy”* publication provides additional background, identifying **two major periods in which the dedication of Confederate monuments and other symbols spiked — the first two decades of the 20th century and during the civil rights movement:**

Southerners began honoring the Confederacy with statues and other symbols almost immediately after the Civil War. The first Confederate Memorial Day, for example, was dreamed up by the wife of a Confederate soldier in 1866. That same year, Jefferson Davis laid the cornerstone of the Confederate Memorial Monument in a prominent spot on the state Capitol grounds in Montgomery, Alabama.

But two distinct periods saw a significant rise in the dedication of monuments and other symbols.

¹ Read the full Executive Summary here: <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy#executive-summary>

The first began around 1900, amid the period in which states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise the newly freed African Americans and re-segregate society. This spike lasted well into the 1920s, a period that saw a dramatic resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which had been born in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.

The second spike began in the early 1950s and lasted through the 1960s, as the civil rights movement led to a backlash against desegregationists.

Critics may say removing a flag or monument, renaming a military base or school, or ending a state holiday is tantamount to “erasing history.” But the argument that the Confederate flag and other displays represent “heritage, not hate” ignores the near-universal heritage of African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved by the millions in the South. It trivializes their pain, their history and their concerns about racism — whether it’s the racism of the past or that of today. And it conceals the true history of the Confederate States of America and the seven decades of Jim Crow segregation and oppression that followed the Reconstruction era.

There is no doubt among reputable historians that the Confederacy was established upon the premise of white supremacy and that the South fought the Civil War to preserve its slave labor. Its founding documents and its leaders were clear. “Our new government is founded upon ... the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition,” declared Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens in his 1861 “Cornerstone speech.”²

3. In considering the renaming (and removal or covering of the Pickett plaque) of this bridge, PCDD staff reviewed the origins of the naming and the intent behind it. Review of historic *Bellingham Herald* articles provided by the Whatcom Museum Archives revealed that the existing concrete bridge honored all actions of Captain Pickett, even those subsequently made by him while serving as a General in the Confederate Army.
 - A. According to a Bellingham Herald article dated **Tuesday July 3rd, 1917**, “a granite boulder marking the site of the military bridge built across Whatcom Creek by Lieutenant (afterward Captain) George E. Pickett in 1856, was dedicated by the Chief Whatcom Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.” The article went on to describe the ceremony, noting that “The unveiling was preceded by a stirring address by Judge John A. Kellogg³, who extolled the ‘matchless heroism’ of Captain Pickett as displayed both in upholding the American flag on San Juan island **and later, as general, in leading the magnificent charge at Gettysburg.**” The article provides a background of Pickett’s

² [Executive Summary, Whose Heritage: Public symbols of the Confederacy, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019.](#)

past military service in Mexico and in Bellingham and the San Juan Islands, as well as his prowess in battle after joining the Confederacy in 1861.

- a. See **Exhibit A.3:** Bellingham Herald article dated Tuesday July 3, 1917.
- B. On **Tuesday April 16th, 1918**, a new concrete bridge across Whatcom Creek was designated in honor of Captain Pickett by the city council at the request of a committee from the “Twentieth Century Club.”
- a. See **Exhibit A.4:** *Bellingham Herald* article dated Tuesday April 16th, 1918.
- C. According to the Bellingham Herald, on **Friday September 24th, 1920**, *“The bronze tablet, which is to be set into the Pickett Bridge on Prospect Street Thursday of next week has been placed on exhibition in a window of the Bellingham National Bank. It is about 8x14 inches and bears the following inscription in handsome raised letters:*
- a. *‘1857 – Pickett Bridge. Built on the site chosen for a military bridge by Capt. George E. Pickett. Placed by Chief Whatcom Daughters of the American Revolution – 1920.’*
 - b. *In addition there is the emblem of the society.*
 - c. See **Exhibit A.5:** *Bellingham Herald* article dated Friday September 24th, 1920.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. While the naming of the bridge honors George Pickett’s pre-Civil War service in the region, the dedication also specifically honors aspects of George Pickett’s Civil War service.
2. The naming of the subject bridge (Pickett Bridge) honoring the Civil War service of General Pickett does not reflect the values of the City of Bellingham.

RECOMMENDATION:

After careful consideration of the record and a detailed review of the facts associated with this application, PCDD Staff has determined that the naming of the subject bridge, referred to as the “Pickett” Bridge, is inappropriate and does not reflect the values of the City of Bellingham. PCDD Staff recommends that the subject bridge no longer be referred to as the “Pickett” bridge on all City documents and maps and the memorial plaque should be removed or covered.
