Researching and reckoning with New England's role in colonization and slavery

Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names

Public Comment ● November 16, 2023

My name is Meadow Dibble and I am here today with my colleague Erika Arthur representing Place Justice, a truth-seeking and historical recovery initiative of Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Place Justice initiative is carried out in collaboration with Atlantic Black Box, the public history nonprofit that I direct, which empowers communities across the Northeast to research and reckon with our region's role in colonization, the slave trade, and the economy of enslavement.

On behalf of the Place Justice Advisory Council, I want to first express our sincere thanks to every member of this Committee for your sustained efforts to address racist and derogatory place names across these lands and waters. Your thoughtful deliberations are having a significant and real-time impact on our work in Maine. I also want to convey our deep gratitude to Secretary Haaland for her decisive leadership in this field.

Before sharing some preliminary findings from our analysis of place names in the Dawnland, or what has come to be known as Maine, I will mention that Place Justice supports the Coalition for Outdoor Renaming and Education (CORE) and we endorse the recommendations put forward in the collective letter that CORE addressed to the Committee.

Our comments today aim to support one of those recommendations in particular: that your Advisory Committee should be empowered to address commemorative place names honoring individuals who have perpetrated violence and caused grievous harm.

To date, the Place Justice team has analyzed all of the place names included in the GNIS database for 12 of Maine's 16 counties. A number of notable trends have emerged.

Although Indigenous people have been living here for 12,000 years, Wabanaki place names make up only 6% of all official names in Maine today. Many of these have been altered from their original languages, leaving their origins and meanings unknown to present-day non-Native residents. And while Africans and people of African descent have had a presence here since the first Europeans arrived on these shores in the early 1600s, evidence of that early Black presence has largely been conveyed through racist and derogatory place names scrawled across the landscape. We have identified over 60 such names–a dozen of which are current, the others historic. Only a quarter of these were ever accounted for in GNIS.

Through active resistance and unwavering resilience, both the Black and Indigenous populations of this land survived enslavement, dispossession, and attempted genocide. Yet it is their oppressors who have been honored with place names. The status quo is an affront to our humanity–all of us.

In Maine, commemorative names that honor individuals or families make up nearly 50% of all place names. Of these, fewer than 2% reference women, and generally it is not for their deeds or accomplishments. The other 98% enshrine the memory of men or heads of household (i.e., men). With only a couple of exceptions, these are white settler or settler-descendent men. Among them are lumbermen, mill owners, sea captains, and farmers, but also countless conquerors, bounty hunters, colonizers, enslavers, and slave traders.

We are still in the process of identifying exactly which place names commemorate individuals who were rewarded with either land or money for killing and/or kidnapping Wabanaki people in the early colonial period or for those who enslaved or trafficked African-descended people from the 17th century right up through the Civil War. It is already clear to us, however, that *hundreds* of Maine's place names fall into this category.

Four of the state's counties are named after some of the nation's most prominent enslavers: Franklin County was named after Founder Benjamin Franklin, who was an active participant in the slave trade and an enslaver before becoming an abolitionist. Washington County was named after the first U.S. President George Washington, who enslaved upwards of 300 people on his five farms. Hancock County was named after John Hancock, the wealthy Boston merchant who grew up with enslaved people in his household and who inherited slaves from his uncle. Then there is Waldo County, named after Samuel Waldo, whose enormous wealth was derived from his activities as a slave trader in West Africa and as an enslaver in Boston starting in 1728.

We know of at least four place names in Maine that commemorate Southern plantations: Monticello, Mount Vernon, Montpelier, and Ashland, which respectively celebrate Jefferson's, Washington's, Madison's, and Clay's forced labor camps.

What's more, the state counts 33 "plantations" within its borders. In Maine, a plantation is a type of minor civil division falling between an unincorporated area and a town. Ours is apparently alone among U.S. states in continuing to use this designation, which historically referred not to the planting of crops but rather to the very intentional planting of settlers. In other words, this term is a holdover from the era of colonization. It also carries the brutal semantic charge associated with its Southern counterpart.

There are over 200 places in our state that have numerical names, which are problematic in their own right. For example, the place name T11 R15 WELS stands for "Township 11 Range 15 West of the Easterly Line of the State." Maine is full of these soulless quantifiers that served to parcel out land to timber barons.

If we had more time, Erika and I could share some of the countless shocking and horrifying stories we've uncovered behind many of Maine's commemorative place names. If you'll permit just one example, we'd like to leave you with a story that stands out as particularly poignant in light of today's proceedings.

At first glance, you would never guess that the little town of Blaine, Maine with its population of 660 nestled along the Canadian border is historically connected to Hawai'i. It is named after James G. Blaine, who represented Maine in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate before serving as Secretary of State under three administrations. Blaine was a rabid expansionist whose policies led to the U.S. acquisition of Pacific and Caribbean colonies at the turn of the last century. Writing in 1890, he stated, *"I think there are only three places that are of value enough to be taken… One is Hawaii, and the others are Cuba and Porto Rico [sic]..."* The man who worked behind the scenes to engineer the annexation of Hawai'i left his name not only on a rural Maine town but also on the mansion–known as Blaine House–that is home to Maine's current Governor and has been occupied by her predecessors for over a century.

Thank you for allowing us to share some of what we're learning through the Place Justice initiative. And sincere thanks for your important work to address these visible vestiges of the colonial violence whose legacies continue to reverberate today.

Sincerely,

Meadow Dibble & Erika Arthur
Atlantic Black Box
Place Justice Initiative