What’s in a Name? The University of Maryland Football Stadium Controversy

Anne Turkos, University Archivist
Harry Clifton “Curley” Byrd

- Born in 1889 in Crisfield, MD
- Received degree in civil engineering from MAC in 1908
- Multi-sport, star athlete while a student
- Returned to MAC in 1912 in multiple roles
- Served as president of UMD from 1935 to 1954
Old Byrd Stadium

- Football competition at MAC began in 1892
- First stadium constructed in 1923
- Named for Byrd at request of the Alumni Association “as an expression of gratitude for his work in promoting sportsmanship and in perfecting the athletic organization of this university”

Dedication plaque unveiled, November 24, 1923
Current Stadium

- Board of Regents decides on January 20, 1950, to transfer the name of the stadium from the old facility to the new one
- Name of stadium provokes minimal public discussion until recent years
- Concerns raised about Byrd’s racial views and whether he deserved to be honored in such a visible way

Byrd showing William P. Cole, chair of the Board of Regents, the new facility, c. 1950
Controversy Gains Attention

- Students petition and protest
- Editorials in student newspaper
- SGA resolution in support of name change
- President Loh forms work group to examine name change question on September 28, 2015

Byrd Stadium protest at dedication of Frederick Douglass statue. Image courtesy of umdwritersbloc.com
UMD Archives Involvement

- No formal role on work group
- Meeting with sub-groups or individuals on the work group
- Observing work group meetings and commenting as appropriate
Challenges

• Attempting to ensure that Byrd’s entire career and accomplishments, not just his racial views, received attention

• Dealing with virtual erasure of recognition of one of the most significant leaders in UMD history
Board of Regents’ Decision

• Loh submits recommendation to BOR to change name, December 9, 2015
• Long list of witnesses for and against recommendation
• Each regent presents his/her own opinion
• Final vote 12-5 in favor of name change
Fallout

- Without prior consultation, UMD Libraries, and ultimately UMD Archives, tasked with installing a permanent exhibit to “memorialize President Byrd in the library”
- Reporters for student newspaper immediately wanted to know what other building names were controversial
- Series of dialogues on diversity and community in spring 2016 semester
- Minimal impact on donor relations and football season ticket sales
- Difficult conversations continue with individuals unhappy with decision

The name Byrd Stadium is no more, but other UMD buildings have discriminatory namesakes, too

Francis Scott Key Hall is one of the campus buildings named after a person with ties to slavery.

By Lexie Schapit
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The University System of Maryland Board of Regents approved UMD President Wallace Loh’s recommendation Friday to rename Byrd Stadium as Maryland Stadium after months of discussion that the stadium’s namesake — former university President Harry Clifton “Curley” Byrd – supported segregation.

Loh’s recommendation included a five-year moratorium on changing names of other university buildings that recognize historical figures.

In its Dec. 4 report detailing the arguments for and against changing the stadium’s name, the Byrd Stadium Naming Work Group — which Loh tasked with looking into the name change back in September — noted Byrd Stadium is not the only facility on the campus named after someone who supported racial inequality and discrimination. The group suggested that “the campus might undertake a broader initiative to discuss and debate building names and university values.”
Lessons Learned

• Need to continue to strive to make University Archives program better known on campus.

• Have to be ready to insert UMD Archives into issues where historical perspective is needed and should be valued.

• Must remain neutral and sensitive to concerns of parties on both sides of an issue/question.

• Have to have a stake that is recognized by the university and the Libraries’ administration in the damage control.

• Reinforced the reality that it’s extremely difficult to overcome pre-conceived notions.