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Two descendants of Potter College founder support name change

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Jan 25, 2021

Two descendants of the slave-owning namesake of Western Kentucky University's Potter College of Arts and Letters – Pleasant J. Potter – wrote to a campus task force examining the issue, urging the group to recommend a name change.

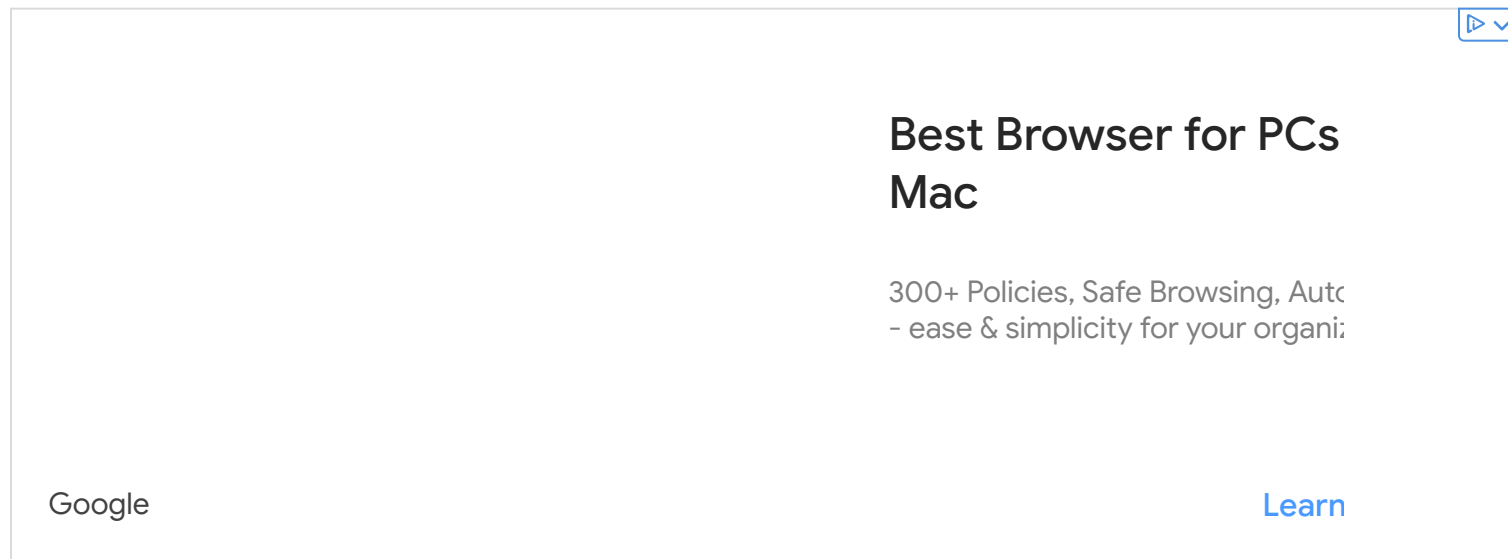
“While we are proud that our ancestor donated the money for the founding of WKU's Potter College of Arts and Letters, we think it is time to find a new name,” Gill Potter and Douglass Woods Potter wrote in a letter to WKU's Naming and Symbols Task Force on Thursday.

The two wrote that they don't believe the college's current name will “welcome the diversity of students that make WKU great” and that “the name has been on the building for long enough. It is time to excise this ghost,” according to a copy of the letter that was sent to the Daily News.

In response to a request for comment, WKU spokesman Bob Skipper wrote in an email Monday that “the members of the Naming and Symbols Task Force have been made aware of the letter as they continue their work.”

In August, WKU President Timothy Caboni directed the task force's formation shortly after the full story of the namesakes for the Potter College and the Ogden College of Science and

Engineering came to light. The namesakes of WKU's Potter College and Ogden College historically held people as slaves, and they came from slaveholding families, according to WKU Historian David Lee.

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“In many ways, the names we carve into our buildings and attach to our academic units should define for members of our community the best of what we have been, what we are and what we aspire to be,” Caboni said at the time, speaking during his annual Convocation address, which kicks off the academic year for WKU faculty and staff.

“To this end, I have established a task force to conduct a thorough examination of the history of WKU’s namings; explore options for how we might address those that might be problematic; and make recommendations for university leadership to consider,” Caboni said.

“This will require difficult and challenging conversations, but the effort is vital as we consider the ways in which we welcome and support every member of the WKU community,” Caboni said.

So far, however, the group’s work has proceeded behind closed doors.

Declining to offer details about the group’s work, Skipper told the Daily News on Jan. 12 that “the committee understands that this is important work and continues to gather and study information. We will provide updates when appropriate.”



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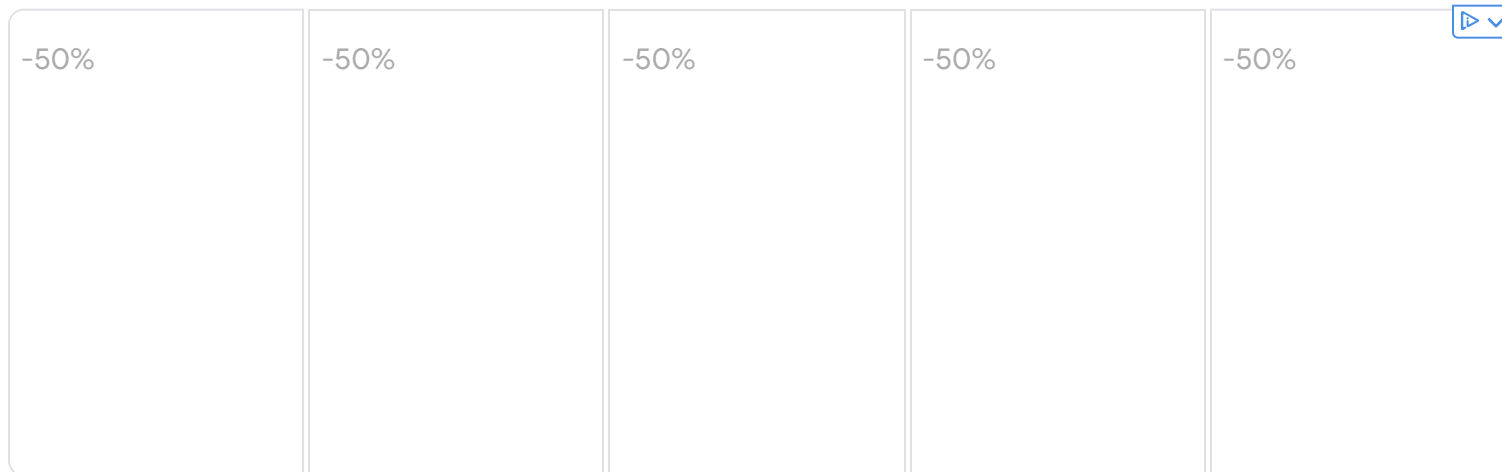
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In an interview, Gill Potter told the Daily News that he and his brother were, until recently, unaware that their great-great-grandfather held people as slaves.

Speaking for himself, Gill Potter said it was obvious to him that the name should be changed. If possible, he said, the descendants of the people Pleasant J. Potter held as slaves should be located and have a say in choosing a new name “that is welcoming to everyone.”

Potter noted that the college’s name is purely honorary and that the two haven’t donated money for that honor.

Gill Potter currently lives and works in the San Francisco Bay area, while the letter notes that his brother, Douglass, lives in Lexington.



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“The Potter name will always be a part of the legacy of the school, but it need not be the signpost. While some may see changing the name of the school as erasing history, we see it as an acknowledgment of the pain and suffering caused by slavery and, unfortunately, our ancestors. We should not allow 30 pieces of silver to determine who feels welcome at the school,” the Potters wrote in their letter.

“We hope that the task force will be able to locate descendants of Africans enslaved in the region as part of the decision making process. Those voices, plus the voices of your current student body, should be the basis of finding a new name that welcomes everyone,” the two wrote.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

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