

Contemplating Miller to Mira: Changing Lafayette's Racist Past

Mrs. Mary E. Miller of this place is the only woman in the United States known to be the president of a bank. It is the Lafayette bank, located here, which she practically owns and manages. Other women are known to have charge of departments and occupy minor fiduciary positions in large banks, but none to own, officer and manage a bank of her own. Her son, George, is vice president, her son, James, is cashier, and his wife, Elizabeth, is assistant cashier, so that it is distinctly a "Miller bank." It has now been in operation over two years.

From the *Lafayette News*, December 13, 1902

My town was named by a woman. Her name was Mary Miller and she named this town after her husband, Lafayette Miller. As one of the first women in the United States to own and run a bank, her legacy is still being upheld in Lafayette to this day. However, a year ago, there was a petition started to change the name of a housing development called "The Miller" named in honor of Mary Miller. This petition was passed and the name will be discontinued as of January 2022 in favor of "The Mira". This swap may seem to make no sense, however, under the surface, this is probably the best decision they could've made. Though Mary Miller is the founder of our town and a fantastic woman who created and worked for so much in her whole life, the name Miller has been stained to the point where naming apartments after that family is a terrible misrepresentation of our diverse community.

Mary Miller has landmarks named in honor of her and she rightfully deserves these plaques. She was 20 when she moved to Colorado with her husband and the two of them settled in the Rock Creek House, now known as the Miller Tavern, though no towns were settled yet and the two of them were living in unclaimed territory. 5 years later, they purchased 160 acres of land two miles north that were nearby to Mary

Miller's brother's 290 acres of land. They established a successful farm and had six children before Lafayette Miller died. He was not the greatest man to her, leaving constantly and dying from alcohol consumption, a regular activity for him. A short while afterward, a coal mine strip was discovered in the Miller territory. Mary Miller leased coal rights and earned roughly 13 cents for every lump of coal mined on her territory, making her wealthy from the mine's earning. All of this work granted Mary Miller status for herself, her family and the town she named.

From the wealth she earned from the coal mine, Mary Miller platted the land of the new town Lafayette, named after her dead alcoholic husband who abandoned her with 6 kids, instead of naming it after herself who truly is a brave and strong woman. She managed to get her territory into 144 residential and commercial lots. A couple of years later, she replatted the land and created 350 lots. She began selling the lots to men and women alike. She seemed to show more generosity towards women when selling her land, selling some land to women for as little as \$1 and averaging half as much money as she had men pay, when most banks wouldn't sell to women at all. Using the money she earned, Mary Miller founded the Lafayette Bank and Trust company, or the Miller Bank. She was one of the only women to be president of a bank and her sons were her second-in-commands. When the miners went on strike, Mary Miller paid for their mortgages and their groceries. However, the bank closed in 1914 and Mary Miller died in 1921. Her economic steps paved the way for our current thriving town of Lafayette, but her descendants tarred that legacy with their intolerance.

Symbols matter. Naming honors those named, as shown by Mary Miller naming this town after her husband. However, when people look at names, they carry weight. If

something is named after a morally questionable person, whenever someone looks at the thing in question, they'll associate the name with the person it's named after. In naming this town after her husband, Mary Miller was hoping to secure his legacy. Do the locals think of Lafayette Miller an alcoholic who didn't care much for his wife nor for his kids? Why would she want future residents of this town to be repeating his name daily? And though Marymillertown is not as rhythmic as Lafayette, it would've secured a far better legacy. The people of Lafayette did not want to remember her husband. It was all Mary Miller's work that our town came to be where it is today and we do as much as we can to preserve her forever in our town's history.

But if Mary Miller's legacy is all we want to preserve, why wouldn't we want the apartment buildings to be named in her honor? Though she was an incredible woman, her children did not maintain the high standard she herself did. Several members of her family went on to become members of the Ku Klux Klan (or the KKK), a group of people perpetrating racism. Lafayette is a very inclusive community and the last thing we wish to do is to be in league with items of intolerance, such as racism. All we wish to do is to make sure everyone is respected. One of Mary Miller's grandsons named Frank Miller paid to destroy a swimming pool that was open for white heritage, rather than have it be more inclusive. Fay Miller was a known member of the KKK, "identified as such by his nephew who references the identifiable white horse he rode during KKK parades in Lafayette" (Change.org 1). Mary Miller may have been one of the greatest woman this town has seen, but the Miller name has been stained to the point where it would be inhumane to our diverse community to name something not after Mary Miller herself, but after the Miller family. Therefore, the decision to change The Miller's name is perfectly

reasonable and understandable. I myself stand completely behind this decision and hope that more like this one can be made to help expand to grow our community.

In Richmond, Virginia, people recently removed a statue of Robert E. Lee, a famous general from the south during the Civil War. The materials originally used to build this statue will be used to make art addressing the complex history of race in America. This example of growth in a city represents how people are changing in order to show more respect in communities. People have struggled to comprehend the idea of equality and often the people who do apply it where they go are often scorned upon and laughed at. I think we should look at race as a whole and share all of our opinions on it, taking all of this to a conclusion. People need to realize that many of the symbols we have in our everyday lives may symbolize cruel ideas to others. And though Mary Miller was a great person to symbolize, the Miller family's legacy does not represent Lafayette. Yes, my town was named by a woman, but sadly it was not named after a woman.

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