

Project Title: The Renaming of James Farmer Hall

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jeffrey McClurken, Professor of History and American Studies,
UMW

Interviewer: Sophia Hobbs (SH)

Narrator: Erin Devlin (ED)

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HIST 428

SH: This is Sophia Hobbs, and I'm here with Dr. Devlin at the University of Washington and I am conducting an interview for my Digital History class project on the renaming of Farmer Hall. So, Dr. Devlin, my question for you is first about like the process of renaming Trinkle Hall to Farmer Hall. And my question is, what was your role in the renaming process?

ED: I served as one of the two co-chairs on the naming committee.

SH: And what type of work did that entail for you?

ED: It largely involves working with my co-chair Ana Chichester to sort of lay out a schedule for how the committee was going to complete the work that we have been charged with. The committee began to convene in early January, and we were tasked with both soliciting a call for nominations, about doing a preliminary evaluation of those nominations, and then sending out the final slate of candidates to the campus in a survey opinion poll within the course of the spring semester. That was a pretty rapid timeline. So, we work together to kind of figure out "Okay,

how are we going to accomplish those objectives within the amount of time awarded to us?" And then, you know, also then the coordinating the committee's work. Like, how are we going to, when are we going to meet to discuss these things and that kind of stuff. Kind of an administrative role in that respect in terms of figuring out how we were going to complete the work that we had been charged with doing.

SH: And what was that process like? It felt like you had a lot to do? Like, that's a lot of different things that you're in charge of.

ED: Well, you know, it wasn't...I mean, it was really just a matter of sitting down with a calendar and working backwards, right? Like, "If this is our endpoint, we have to be here by such and such a date." Like, "What does that mean about when we have to send out the poll for people to indicate their preference for what name they would like?" "What does that mean, in terms of like, when we have to, you know, select that slate of candidates?" Working back from that, "What does that mean about when we have to solicit the call for nominations?" So, it was just really a matter of figuring out how much time could be allotted to each task and not allowing too much time to elapse between different phases of the project. It was sort of like we had to keep moving things along.

SH: And I know that this process kind of was interrupted by COVID, or COVID happened during this time period. And what was that like? How was this process affected by the pandemic?

ED: So, I was going back, and I was looking at the naming committee report for a conversation, and I think I had almost forgotten that, actually. The bulk of the committee's work was done in the first half of the spring semester. So that's when campus was still open, and classes, were still operating as normal. And so we had completed, basically, all the steps of the process -- we had solicited the calls for the nominees, we had evaluated the candidates. And then we had also prepared the poll to send out to the campus community so that they could vote. And I remember having conversations about like, "When should we distribute the poll?" And we didn't want to distribute it like right before spring break, or during spring break, because we felt like it might just kind of go out into a vacuum, you know? People, students are getting ready to leave campus or they're in transit and not as attentive to their campus email as they might normally be. And so the decision was made to send it out, basically, like as soon as everybody returned back from spring break. So, we did that. And then, of course, as you know, that week was when the campus had to close and everyone had to go home and everything. But I think it's actually really remarkable. If you look at the rate of return on our survey results, still, like upwards of somewhere in the range of 20 to 30% of students, faculty and staff responded to the poll, even in the midst of that enormous upheaval. And so I really think that that speaks to the investment that the campus community had in this conversation and wanting to play a role in this renaming process. It didn't mean that, obviously, the committee then had to discuss the results of the poll and formulate our final report and everything in this new environment where everything was happening remotely, and via Zoom calls and things like that, but...I think because so much of the committee's work had been front loaded in the first half of the semester, that it wasn't that disruptive in terms of the outcome of the process, you know what I'm saying? It just meant that we had to like...I think it was one of the first committee meetings that I had via Zoom which

would later become just like, you know, par for the course! And all the years to come. So it was just a shift in how we were going to convene, what our process was going to be in that regard.

Not really, it didn't really affect the naming/renaming process, I wouldn't say.

SH: Yeah. So, going off the point that you were saying about just the high rate of response, to the survey. I know that at that point, it was between multiple different names, not just James Farmer, but just touching on the amount of interest in that and the need to change the name, how do you see Farmer's legacy affecting our campus today?

ED: Well, I mean, I think that James Farmer has had an enormous impact on this campus. I mean, I obviously, I was not teaching on this campus, I was not associated with this campus in any way when James Farmer was teaching here. But I have had many discussions with like my peers and colleagues who are faculty, as well as alumni who had the opportunity to take his courses who have all described that as a transformative kind of experience. I also think that, you know, our campus today, one of the pillars in our strategic vision is that we want to foster and promote community engagement and civic action. And I think in many ways, for many students, Farmer sort of represents that in ways that are really powerful and very inspiring. So I think that that is an important part of the legacy that he carries on today. I think there are obviously, there are people in our campus community who had the opportunity to sit in that lecture hall and listen to their stories, and they speak very evocatively about the impact that that had on them. But I think that even for those members of our campus community who never met him, his legacy has been connected in some ways to our institutional values. So I think that continues to resonate, even for those that never had the opportunity to meet him directly.

SH: Absolutely. And touching, lastly, on not just about James Farmer and his legacy specifically, but about the renaming's impact. How do you think the renaming, specifically of Trinkle Hall, has impacted the UMW community?

ED: So is that like a slightly different way of asking? So you're asking not about Farmer's legacy? But what does it mean to remove Trinkle's name? Well, again, I think that that decision had already been made before the naming committee began, right? So there was a committee called the Campus Environmental Committee, it was Ad Hoc Committee at the time, that sort of assessed the campus environment in relation to our ASPIRE statement of values, and did both quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. And part of those qualitative analysis was conducting focus groups and things. So, asking people how they felt about different kinds of representation on campus. And the name of Trinkle Hall came up in those kinds of conversations recurrently and led, ultimately, to the Campus Environmental Committee's recommendation to remove that name from the building. So, you know, I think that that is important for several reasons. One is obviously all of the historical associations that are associated with Trinkle and his time as governor and the legislation that was passed during that time, like the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, and things like that. But I also think this process is important because it really, in many, ways demonstrates how the university is working to be responsive to its current campus community, and a sense of, you know, asking people how they feel about how historical figures and other kinds of representations are on our campus and acting on what they hear, you know. So, I think that's really important. I also think that the naming committee is process then of selecting a new name is in that same spirit, right, like reaching out to the campus community and

saying, "If we are renaming this building, what do we as a campus community want to celebrate?" And welcoming people's input into that process I think is a really powerful statement and a potential model for the way that we might think about campus representation on building names and in murals and other kinds of things like that going forward.

SH: Thank you so much, Dr. Devlin. Before we finish up today, do you have anything else that you would like to add about just this process in general?

ED: I don't think so. I just think it's really amazing. I guess I would like to say all the members of the committee are really dedicated to seeing this process through. I also think it's really amazing that literally so many people in our campus community contributed to the process. And I just think it's something to celebrate.

SH: I love that! Thank you so much.