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A Resolution on the Renaming of Melvin Hazen Park

November 17, 2000

From 1874 to 1967, the District of Columbia was governed by a three-member Board of Commissioners appointed by the President of the United States to administer laws passed by the United States Congress. Congress called on the Commissioners and the departmental heads they appointed to inform legislation and appropriations. This period coincided with a significant retrenchment of rights for African Americans and the implementation of segregation in both public and private accommodations, peaking in 1941.

Melvin Hazen enjoyed a long career under this system of government, beginning in 1889 as an axeman in surveying team laying out the streets of DC outside of the 1793 L'Enfant-Ellicott city plan. He rose to influence as District Surveyor in 1908, overseeing the dramatic growth of DC from then until 1933 when he was appointed to the Board of Commissioners and elected as its President. He was popular in his time, serving as President of the Commission until his death in 1941.

Between 1869 and 1949, what is now Fort Reno Park was a mixed-race—but not integrated—neighborhood known as Reno. Reno was a growing community whose churches and clubs served as hubs for African Americans west of Rock Creek. White suburbs had recently grown up around Reno, and many of the people moving to them sought racial exclusivity. Real estate developers were relentless in their efforts to provide it.

In his capacity as surveyor, Melvin Hazen advocated for clearance of the largely African American-populated dwellings that faced the alleys behind white neighborhoods without much thought to relocation of the residents. In his capacity as District Commissioner, he oversaw the height of segregation in DC and advocated for road widening in largely African American areas, although this was not implemented until after World War II.

Hazen played a central role in the clearance of the Reno community. Citizen groups and developers had suggested clearance as early as 1899, but the government saw no value until Hazen took the issue up.

1. In 1914, Hazen, in his capacity as Surveyor, advised the Board of Commissioners to seize Reno using eminent domain, reconfigure its streets, and resell the land at a profit, in an early iteration of urban renewal policies. The advice was not acted on.
2. On January 8th, 1920, he forwarded the proposal of an agent of Chevy Chase Land Company, Harold Doyle to condemn, resubdivide, and sell the land under Reno, with recommendation.

3. On October 14th, 1920, Hazen renewed his recommendation, including a proposed bill. The Commissioners did not act, however handwritten notes from Commissioner Charles Kutz on the coversheet read: “It has been orally suggested to Mr. [Harold] Doyle to have such a bill introduced [to Congress]+ referred to the Commission.”
4. Hazen recommended the clearance of Reno in his report that year, offering conversion to a park, as proposed in the 1902 McMillan Plan, if resubdivision was determined to be unlawful.
5. Between 1923 and 1924, during debates on how to expand the Fort Reno reservoir, Hazen brought the idea of clearance to the attention of the staff again. He appears to have organized a conference on February 6th, 1924 of prominent Washingtonians to persuade the Commissioners of the value of clearing all of Reno and converting it to a park.
6. By March 4th, 1924, Hazen had developed a plan for the park. That October, he recommended clearance and conversion in his annual report, proposing model legislation nearly identical to versions circulated by Harold Doyle and white Citizens Associations in 1923. Hazen requested the topic be discussed by the newly formed National Capital Park Commission in 1925, who recommended the plan, but requested separate funding from Congress.

-When bills were introduced to Congress, responsibility fell to Hazen to defend the bill, recorded in a July 6th, 1926 Senate Committee on the District of Columbia hearing: “The District has in mind acquiring the subdivision for several reasons... First, to wipe it off, so the street plan can be developed in harmony with the general plan for the District... It is an ill-devised, ill-shaped subdivision, that you cannot do anything with unless you just wipe it off.” These bills were not successful and sparked a dramatic resistance.

-Hazen’s role in the clearance after this is uncertain, besides routine duties in land acquisition for the reservoir expansion and what is now Alice Deal Middle School, both of which began in 1926 and were complete in 1931. Clearance of other areas was assumed by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, who took a more gradual approach than Hazen had proposed, buying or condemning land between 1927 and 1949.

Despite open criticism of the project as racist by African-American activists and federal officials, Hazen maintained his reputation locally and was appointed DC Commissioner in 1933, where became extremely popular among white Washingtonians.

On December 19th, 1941, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission named a stream valley park they had acquired after Hazen, in tribute to his advocacy for acquiring parkland.

ANC 3F and its Commissioners have been having community conversations and discussions about systematic racism in our cultural and governmental institutions. These couple along with incidents of racial injustice make us consider the role that we can take as the local elected officials.

ANC 3F feels that the name Melvin Hazen does not represent the kind of community which we feel we are and for which we strive to be – a community that values inclusivity and diversity, and one that condemns racism and xenophobia.

Given the central role of Melvin Hazen in the destruction of the Reno community, we feel that

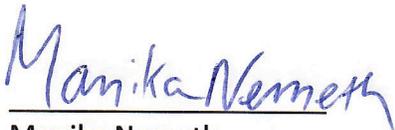
his name is the very antithesis of our values.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that ANC 3F urges the National Park Service to change the name of Melvin C. Hazen Park;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the National Park Service work with the local community and ANC 3F to find a name that is suitable for the park; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that Commissioners Monika Nemeth and David Cristeal are authorized to speak on behalf of ANC 3F regarding this matter.

ANC 3F PASSED this resolution at its meeting on November 17, 2020, which was properly noticed and at which a quorum was present, by a vote of 5 in favor, 0 opposed, and 0 abstaining (5-0-0).



Monika Nemeth
Chair, ANC 3F