

Re: The Department of Physics' Proposal to Remove the Name from LeConte Hall

From: The Building Name Review Committee

To: Chancellor Carol Christ

September 25, 2020

Dear Chancellor Christ:

The Building Name Review Committee has evaluated the proposal from the Department of Physics to remove the LeConte name. After studying the proposal, collecting more than 600 comments, and carefully evaluating all information presented, our committee voted unanimously to recommend that the name be removed. We further recommend that the Department of Physics create a permanent exhibit or series of events that engages critically with the history of the LeConte brothers and the reasons why the LeConte name was removed.

Building Name Review Committee Principles

The legacy of a building's namesake should be in alignment with the values and mission of the university. The values of UC Berkeley are expressed in our [Principles of Community](#).

In deciding whether to remove a building name, we believe that the committee should be guided by two principles:

1. As stated in the [Regents of the University of California Policy 4400: University of California Diversity Statement](#):

[T]he University of California renews its commitment to the full realization of its historic promise to recognize and nurture merit, talent, and achievement by supporting diversity and equal opportunity in its education, services, and administration, as well as research and creative activity. The University particularly acknowledges the acute need to remove barriers to the recruitment, retention, and advancement of talented students, faculty, and staff from historically excluded populations who are currently underrepresented.

We view as our intellectual and ethical responsibility the promotion of an inclusive, global perspective on the peoples and cultures of the world, particularly in light of scholarly traditions that may omit, ignore, or silence the perspectives of many groups, such as ethnic minorities; people from non-European nations; women; lesbian, gay and transgender people; and disabled people, among others.

2. Whether or not a building's name is removed, we believe it is historically and socially valuable to retain a public record, perhaps in the form of a plaque in the building, that notes the building's history of naming and the deeds of its namesakes, including any positive contributions the namesake may have made to their discipline, the University, or the world beyond.

Building Name Review Process

Per the process established by the Building Name Review Committee, the committee initiates a review once it receives a proposal. The proposal must make a strong, stand-alone case for why a building name should be removed.

Once a case goes forward, the review process includes wide-spread dissemination of the proposal via emails and posts on Berkeley websites, a comment period, the posting of comments, time for additional research or public meetings (if needed), and finally a report with recommendations for the Chancellor about the proposal.

LeConte Proposal

The Department of Physics, housed in the building at issue, submitted the proposal to remove the LeConte name to our committee after a nearly unanimous vote by the Physics faculty at a Departmental meeting on June 17, 2020. This vote followed an informal resolution in 2018 by this same faculty to rename the building, which had been taken in response to local media reports about the legacy of the LeConte brothers, the renaming of Joseph LeConte Elementary School by the Berkeley Unified School District, as well as calls since at least 2015 by the Black Student Union to remove the LeConte name.

LeConte Hall is on the National Register of Historic Buildings and multiple sources contend that the name LeConte was given to honor both John and Joseph LeConte. John LeConte, a physicist, was the first faculty member of the University of California. He also served as Interim President in 1869, and as President from 1875-1881. Joseph LeConte, a geologist and paleontologist, joined the faculty soon after his brother. Joseph LeConte gained prominence as a president of the American Academy of Sciences and as a co-founder (with John Muir) of the Sierra Club.

The LeContes were from a slaveholding family in Georgia, and inherited a plantation with 200 slaves. They both collaborated with the Confederate Army, working to provide the Confederacy explosives for use in battle. After the Civil War, the LeContes returned to academic work at the College of South Carolina but chafed at the institutional changes that had occurred due to Reconstruction. By 1866 their university now welcomed Black students and faculty and was being administered in part by Black trustees and legislators. The LeContes came to Berkeley in 1869 and were among the most prominent of the new faculty members at UC. Joseph used his position to publish a series of articles and books (including "The South Revisited" [1889] and *The Race Problem in the South* [1892]) to advocate strenuously against so-called "race mixture" and for the exclusion and disenfranchisement of Black people on the basis of eugenic principles of racial hierarchy.

Our Committee's Outreach and Deliberations

On July 6, 2020, a campus-wide announcement informed the UC Berkeley community that the proposal from the Department of Physics was posted on our website and that comments on the proposal were encouraged. In total, 634 responses were collected through our website's feedback form. 87% of the collected responses were in favor of the proposal to remove the name, and 13% of the collected responses opposed the proposal.

The Building Name Review Committee met on September 18, 2020 to discuss the LeConte proposal. Present were Paul Fine, Keith Feldman, Frank C. Worrell, Dylan Penningroth, Ari Chivukula, James Ford, Alex Mabanta, Melvin Tangonan, and Victoria Vera; *ex officio* committee members Therese Leone and Nancy McKinney; and staff member Verna Bowie.

Our committee discussed the proposal, and the arguments in favor of and opposed to removing the LeConte name from the building. We reviewed additional arguments that were made by the commenters. We considered how our principles and processes were aligned with the LeConte proposal.

The comments from people supportive of removing the LeConte name argued that it would be against the UC Berkeley Principles of Community to honor someone who had such extremely racist views and who worked to set into place the justification for Jim Crow policies that terrorized Black people in the South following the Civil War. Commenters in favor of removal said that the removal of the name would signal that the University is committed to fighting the ongoing legacy of White supremacy and providing a more welcome environment for all students. The commenters stated that for Black members of campus in particular, it is difficult to feel a full sense of belonging on a campus that honors the LeConte brothers. One commenter, Professor Gibor Basri, former Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion, wrote: "The removal of the LeConte name from the Physics buildings is consistent with the evolution of the position of the University towards a better society. As the sole black faculty member in the entire division of Mathematical and Physical Sciences for nearly 25 years I speak from experience. This decision would be a natural step in what continues to be a slow awakening to the pernicious and pervasive issue of racism in America by the world's premier public university. UC Berkeley has a duty to help lead toward a more enlightened world. I applaud my faculty colleagues for their strong support for this action, and don't wish to imagine what would cause the Committee to reject it."

The arguments from the commenters opposed to the name change stated that there was some confusion about whether the building was originally named after John only or after both brothers. On this matter, one commenter, Emeritus Professor Jere Lipps, cited the University Emergency Plan for LeConte Hall written by Anthony Vitan in 2015, which lists the name as John Lawrence LeConte Hall. Two authors, Page and Turnbull (1999), wrote in a report on Historic Structures for the Office of Capital Projects that the building was "named for John LeConte, professor of Physics, 1868-91, and third president of the University, 1876-81 and his brother, Joseph LeConte, professor of Geology and Natural Science, 1868-1901." The National Register of Historic Places similarly states that the building was named after both brothers. Professor Lipps concludes: "However, since so many people associate John and Joseph LeConte with the building, perhaps considering both of them is necessary no matter the truth."

Another commenter (who preferred to remain anonymous) wrote about the confusion regarding whether the building was named for one or both brothers suggested that we rename the building “John LeConte Hall” to disassociate the name of the building from Joseph LeConte and instead honor John. Although the committee acknowledged that it may be true that the building was originally named after only John, to keep the name LeConte on the building and call it “John LeConte” Hall would not be a prudent course of action for several reasons. It would be against the spirit of responding to calls from the Black Student Union and other groups who have worked to advocate for change to turn around and rename the building “John LeConte Hall.” It would likewise honor someone with the rank of Major in the Confederate Army who worked actively to defeat the Union Army and who left his academic position in South Carolina because he did not want to participate in Reconstruction. Moreover, we have no evidence that John LeConte ever disavowed any of the writings of his brother. Many of the other commenters claimed that we should not be in the business of erasing history at UC Berkeley. We agree and for that reason, we think it is important for the campus to make a plaque, exhibit, or series of events that will continue to tell the story of the LeConte brothers, their contributions to the University, and why their name was removed from the building.

During our deliberations, every member of the committee expressed an opinion. The committee voted unanimously that the name be removed from LeConte Hall. We also recommend that campus make a substantive effort to create an exhibit, seminar series, or other event to publicize this decision.

Chancellor Christ, thank you for your support for our committee and its important work. We look forward to your response to our recommendations, which we believe will help UC Berkeley acknowledge its past while becoming more inclusive and supportive of today’s community.

Sincerely,

Paul Fine, Professor, Integrative Biology (Chair)

Keith Feldman, Associate Professor, Ethnic Studies (DECC representative)

Frank C. Worrell, Professor, Graduate School of Education

Dylan Penningroth, Professor, Law and History

Fabrizio Mejia, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Equity and Success, Equity and Inclusion

James Ford, Chief of Staff, Academic Planning

Melvin Tangonan, ASUC Senator

Victoria Vera, ASUC President

Ari Chivukula, Berkeley Law

Alex Mabanta, Berkeley Law & GA Legislative Affairs Director

Therese Leone, Deputy Campus Counsel (ex-officio)

Nancy McKinney, University Development and Alumni Relations (ex-officio)

Verna Bowie (ex-officio)