



RIDER
UNIVERSITY

AUGUST 2, 2021

Task Force on Rider and the History of Slavery

**RATIONALE FOR REMOVING THE VAN CLEVE
NAME FROM THE ALUMNI HOUSE**

Executive summary

This report provides additional information to support the recommendation to remove the Van Cleve name from Alumni House, thereby referring to the building as Alumni House. The Task Force on Rider and the History of Slavery (TFHS) presented its recommendations to the President's Cabinet on January 27, 2021 and to the Board of Trustees on March 3, 2021. In addition, we met separately as a task force with Board of Trustee Member, Marc McKithen, and President, Greg Dell'Omo, Ph.D. on April 30, 2021 to address outstanding concerns about Benjamin Van Cleve's lifetime views on slavery. On June 23, 2021, a subcommittee of the Task Force met to provide a deeper analysis of our recommendation to remove the Van Cleve name. We also performed additional research on Van Cleve's personal views and involvement in enslaving individuals and upholding the institution of slavery.

The research further confirmed Van Cleve's involvement and did not yield any documentation of his personal views or a change in his behavior renouncing his participation in the enslavement of others. In fact, we uncovered more information confirming his involvement. Additionally, the rationale for removal of the name includes a commitment to Rider's Inclusive Excellence Plan, the effect of the history of slavery on Black and African-American students, faculty, staff, and other community stakeholders, the possible missed opportunity to be a conscientious leader in this area, and the lack of prominence of the Van Cleve name as it relates to Rider University. The report further identifies next steps for the University.

Given the national and campus momentum for racial justice, we urge the Board of Trustees to remove the name as soon as possible. Please see the initial report for the complete analysis of the findings and recommendations of the task force.

This report is outlined as follows:

I. ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL INFORMATION ON BENJAMIN VAN CLEVE

II. RATIONALE FOR THE REMOVAL OF THE NAME

III. NEXT STEPS FOR THE REMOVAL OF THE NAME

I. Additional historical information on Benjamin Van Cleve

Upon request of the Honorable Chief Judge Marc McKithen, our co-chair, Brooke Hunter, Ph.D., performed additional research to ascertain more information about Benjamin Van Cleve's view and actions concerning slavery over his entire life. The original report provided a summary of what we know about Benjamin Van Cleve and the enslaved people he owned. As previously noted, evidence confirms he held at least two enslaved people, a woman named Dinah and one man. Incomplete records make it impossible to determine the total number of enslaved persons Van Cleve held in bondage. Benjamin Van Cleve is not a well-known historical figure today and few historical records are known to survive about him to provide a detailed sketch of his life.

Although information about Van Cleve's personal views could not be found, at this time, Dr. Hunter was able to add the following information:

- » Benjamin Van Cleve purchased the property that includes the land where Rider is now located by 1773. Extant tax records from 1778, 1779, 1786, 1789, and 1799 show that Benjamin, who owned 254 acres, was one of the largest landholders in Maidenhead (the township name was changed to Lawrence in 1816). Van Cleve gained prominence as a public official during the American Revolution and founding era of the United States of America. He followed his father into local government as colonial resistance to British imperial policies intensified and support for independence grew. At the age of 36, Benjamin Van Cleve answered the call to arms against British rule. He served as an officer in the First Hunterdon militia, leading troops in the Battle of Long Island in 1776. He resigned from the army on November 13, 1777 after being elected to the New Jersey Assembly. He filled the seat of John Hart, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He continued to serve in the state legislature for over two decades and was chosen Speaker of the Assembly multiple times during the 1780s.
- » Slavery actually grew in New Jersey after independence. This helps explain why New Jersey was the last northern state to take steps toward abolishing slavery. The New Jersey Legislature passed the Gradual Abolition Act on February 15, 1804. Like the laws in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York, it compensated slaveholders for their lost property through forced labor. The

act set the number of years of servitude for those children of enslaved mothers born after July 4, 1804, at twenty-one years for females and twenty-five for males. No enslaved person was immediately freed and newborn children were forced to serve masters for the majority of their lives. The act created two categories: slaves for life and “slaves for a term” to borrow historian James Gigantino’s phrase. However, as Gigantino argues, the lives of “freeborn children [were] indistinguishable from those who remained in legal bondage”.

- » No documents have been found that give voice to Van Cleve’s opinions about slavery in his own words. However, several records demonstrate his participation in and support of slavery.
- » **1778, 1779, 1786, and 1799**, tax records document that Van Cleve owned at least one enslaved man in each of those years.
- » **1778**, runaway advertisement for an enslaved woman named Dinah owned by Benjamin Van Cleve was published in the New Jersey Gazette on December 26, 1778.
- » **1792**, Samuel Hunt and his nephew Elias Hunt of Maidenhead were indicted for manslaughter in a horrific case of the whipping to death of a 15-year old enslaved girl named Hagar who was owned by Samuel Hunt. Samuel Hunt was released on bail and a bond for good behavior paid by Benjamin Van Cleve and Joseph Brearley.
- » **1794**, he voted against gradual abolition as a representative of Hunterdon County in the New Jersey Assembly.
- » **1798**, he voted in favor of maintaining slavery as a racial system of perpetual bondage passed from mother to child and for strengthening restrictions on enslaved peoples. He continued to oppose gradual abolition as a representative of Hunterdon County in the New Jersey Assembly.
- » **1802**, he voted to postpone discussion of gradual abolition until the next legislative session as a representative of Hunterdon County in the New Jersey Assembly.
- » **1804**, he did not participate in the vote for the Gradual Abolition Act because he lost re-election to the New Jersey Assembly in 1803.

II. Rationale for removal of the name

A subcommittee of the task force met on June 23, 2021 to further expound on the task force’s original recommendation to change the name of the Alumni House, currently called the Van Cleve Alumni House. The following represents the conclusions and recommendations.

Four words explain the complete rationale for removing Van Cleve’s name from the building–Rider’s Inclusive Excellence Plan (IEP).

Keeping the name of an enslaver creates obstacles to reaching Rider’s goals for inclusive excellence outlined in the plan. It can be found at rider.edu/inclusive-excellence-plan. There are three primary reasons maintaining the existing name runs counter to the strategic goals of a University which promotes diversity, equity and inclusion. They are as follows:

1. It honors history that is misaligned with our values.

The mission of Rider includes: “We prepare graduates to thrive professionally and to be lifelong independent learners and responsible citizens who embrace diversity, support the common good, and contribute meaningfully to the changing world in which they live and work.” Keeping the name is not consistent with the mission of Rider University. As we aspire to be an institution that embraces diversity, supports the common good and contributes meaningfully to the world – maintaining the name of a building that associates our institutional history with a slave owner – honors a horrific part of our American history and neglects our opportunity to contribute to progressive change in America’s path from enslavement and dehumanizing Black bodies to an anti-racist and equitable future. Given national and campus momentum for racial justice, the time for action is now.

2. It disproportionately and negatively impacts African-American members of the Rider community, including students, faculty, staff, alumni.

Black Americans constantly face reminders of America’s horrendous past which began with slavery and continued through the Jim Crow south and today’s affront with police brutality against Black people. These reminders contribute to individual “stress, time and energy spent navigating hostile racial environments” (Garibay, et al. 2020). These direct individual responses to reminders of violent and unethical treatment of Black people in America run counter to our mission of maximizing success and promoting potential. A preliminary study (Garibay, West, and Mathis, 2020) on black student responses to a University’s enslavement history speaks to this psychological impact.

This type of emotional and psychological impact can operationalize with the following examples of potential negative associated outcomes:

- » Recruitment and retention of African-American students
- » Recruitment and retention of African-American employees
- » African-American alumni engagement and philanthropy

3. It minimizes Rider's opportunity to forge ahead as a leader for inclusive excellence – on our campus and within our surrounding community.

By maintaining the name, the public image of Rider University is misaligned with the vision of promoting inclusive excellence. This may evoke negative perception and may hinder opportunities for community engagement with surrounding areas that are predominantly Black (e.g. Trenton), and contribute to negative public relations from the story of maintaining a tie with a known slave owner. Maintaining the name presents an additional risk of negative campus image and publicity, given many institutions have led with values to make similar name changes.

Other justification for removing the name

- » Removing the name gives Rider an opportunity to be a leader and a model of inclusiveness when dealing with the history of slavery on its campus. In removing the name, Rider will show compassion, empathy, and thoughtfulness of descendants of people adversely affected by this history. It will also show it can balance the needs of all its students, past and present, donors, staff, and faculty members.
- » The name has no strong ties to Rider's identity, in a broader context and standing in the world. Consequently, there is no brand confusion as there would be with removing the school name or major building. Therefore, keeping the name will cause more harm than good.

III. Next steps for removing the name

After deciding to remove the Van Cleve name from the house, thereby referring to the building as Alumni House, the Task Force proposes the following immediate next steps for Fall 2021:

1. Develop a communication strategy in concert with key stakeholders (e.g., Marketing & Communications, Alumni Affairs, President's office), and critical audiences we intend to message regarding our decision.
2. Create a memorial plaque commemorating the enslaved people that lived and worked on Rider's property and hold a memorial and dedication ceremony.
3. Host campus/community educational programming to advance awareness about the history of slavery as it relates to ongoing means of oppression to black people in America.
4. Create a website with the history of Rider's connection to slavery and information about the history of Benjamin Van Cleve that recognizes the complete story of American history.
5. Create a historical sign that interprets the history of Rider's connection to slavery and information about the life of Benjamin Van Cleve to raise campus and community awareness about this significant history.

For more information, please visit:

[RIDER.EDU/HISTORY-OF-SLAVERY](https://www.rider.edu/history-of-slavery)

