

*The Naming of Things: An Examination of Fort Bragg*

*by Jo Erickson*

I live and attend school in the city of Fort Bragg, California. My city is a charming coastal community, and reasonably politically democratic, being a part of California. So it is strange to think about my home being named after a leader of the Confederacy. Indeed, Fort Bragg and its schools are named for Braxton Bragg: a Confederate general, a dishonorable figure for the nation, and an overall bad person. And so while I grow up and wear my “school pride,” it is tainted by the name our school bears because I attend Fort Bragg High School. I will always be ashamed of having the name Bragg in my graduation photos and on my diploma. I do not want my school to stand for this figure because he disaligns with our values. I pose that both the names of the town and my high school be changed to a more equitable denomination that better fits the inclusivity and awareness for which California is known best.

I would like to preface this by stressing that I have no ill intent directed toward the current administrators and school board. They are all lovely people that I know personally, since I am the student school board representative and contribute to their conversations about school proceedings. This is simply an issue that needs to be brought to the forefront of their attention. The issue of our town’s name remains pertinent for many reasons. To begin, our economy is based largely on tourism. Thousands of people hear and read about Fort Bragg, and travel long distances to see Glass Beach, ride the rustic Skunk Train, and see for themselves the charming small-town climate. As a result of the town’s popularity, the name Bragg is circulated worldwide, and associated with its residents. This is not something that can be blown under the rug because it already receives amassed attention. The residents of this city also care about this issue, as

proven by the local Change Our Name group. This group states the mission of the town best, by saying that “we no longer wish to memorialize a Confederate General, a traitor to our country, in this time of racial reckoning” (Mission — Change our Name). Hundreds of citizens are working to raise awareness for this potent problem, and as people are realizing that their city is facing injustice, these numbers can only grow.

At one point, there was another city named Fort Bragg, only this one was in North Carolina. This city is an army base similarly named for Confederate general Braxton Bragg. This town did not, however, come to the renaming decision alone. The Department of Defense actually has implemented naming commission suggestions in locations nationally, including this newly named Fort *Liberty*. The Department of Defense here describes the proceedings: “William A. LaPlante, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, today directed all DOD organizations to begin full implementation of the Commission on the Naming of Items of the Department of Defense recommendations” (Garamone). This applies to cities, streets, buildings, and more. So to look at California’s Fort Bragg through this lens, it is strange to think that we should go unnoticed. The only other town named after Braxton Bragg has been renamed and there is no reason not to do the same in this case, especially with the federal government already having been involved in a very similar situation. Statues, streets, and buildings with relation to Confederacy are being removed and renamed, so why are we forgetting about a whole town?

Let’s also examine a little more closely the person we are talking about. Braxton Bragg was awarded with bravery as a general in the Mexican-American war. Local historian Sylvia Bartley said that in the Mexican War, Bragg was considered heroic (Walker). This resulted in an officer of Bragg’s naming Fort Bragg in his honor. It can be read on the Visit Fort Bragg website, as we do not deny our history: “1st Lt. Horatio Gibson, then serving at the Presidio of San

Francisco, established a military post on the reservation, naming it after his former commanding officer...who later became a General in the Army of the Confederacy” (“About Fort Bragg”). Bragg went on to live in infamy as one of the worst generals in the history of America, much less the Confederacy. Some argue that since the town was named for Bragg prior to his involvement in the Confederacy, there is no need for a name change. However, the intent of the town’s founders is a minute factor in public perception of the town today. The fact that Bragg was a Confederate General negates any achievements he may have made for America in a prior war because he seceded from the nation and fought against the very people for whom he had been working. In any case, Bragg was a poor general, and should not be celebrated in that regard either. He was known to be admonished for “his quick temper, general irritability, and tendency to wound innocent men with barbs thrown during his frequent fits of anger” (Cozzens). He also enslaved over one hundred people, an astonishing feat of inhumanity, even for his time. This was not a man worthy of being the namesake of a town, two schools, and countless businesses.

Many people who oppose changing the name of Fort Bragg bring up the financial burden of changing the signature, branding, and other aspects of the town. And while these aspects might pose issues at a greater level, there is an easy solution for changing the name of Fort Bragg High School. Being a government-funded school, FBHS can petition for the funding needed to rebrand, or if needed, can raise the funds through grassroots groups. Similarly, the funding can be found for town signs and beyond by raising awareness for the issue on a national level. This is a fully attainable goal so long as enough people are invested- and those numbers are growing. I personally have an advantage in raising awareness for the name change as the school board student representative. I want to use my platform to advocate for greater focus on changing the name of our high school and our district. Already, town council committees have been advocating for a name change, and protests are held to promote the cause. It cannot be stressed

enough that getting organized and involved in this cause will aid our community. Not only does living as a Fort Bragg High School student always bring on shame, but living under this label makes it appear as though we accept -or even revere- the Confederacy. My fellow residents of Fort Bragg and the neighboring areas ought to consider our legacy. If we do not bring about change, future generations of American citizens will see the Confederacy as dominating and revered, for as previously mentioned, while our intentions may be good, just like Horatio Gibson when he named the town, our actions may give off a different message. The time is now. Let us make this small thing right.

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*Eligibility Statement*

I can confirm that I am a Fort Bragg High School student.

English teacher Amy Sarisky can attest:

Amy Sarisky 3.28.23