

Professor questions use of Market House in Fayetteville logo

By Andrew Barksdale Staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, July 15, 2015 6:08 pm

A Chapel Hill professor of African-American studies wonders why Fayetteville has a "divisive symbol" on its seal.

Kenneth Janken, who teaches black history at the University of North Carolina's flagship campus, said he would not presume to tell the Fayetteville City Council what to do about its logo that includes the Market House.

But, he said, "it just seems to me that it's exclusive," if black residents are offended by the Market House's historical ties to slavery. He directs the university's Center for the Study of the American South.

"If I'm living in Fayetteville, I would listen to people, what their concerns are, their objections," Janken said.

"I wouldn't be reflexive and say this is my heritage. I think there is an opportunity to listen and to learn."

Some black members of the City Council say they are offended by the Market House and no longer want the city to use its image on its seal, website or other paraphernalia. Police cars and badges stopped including the building's emblem 20 years ago because of the same concerns.

Councilman Chalmers McDougald, who said many black residents see the Market House as degrading, has asked the council to formally discuss the matter at the Aug. 3 work session.

The issue over the iconic two-story downtown building has been long-simmering in Fayetteville, where the number of black and white residents is about the same. Fayetteville lawyer Allen Rogers thrust the topic back into the spotlight this week with a letter urging the mayor and the council to abandon use of the Market House on official documents. He said the national mood, following the Charleston, South Carolina, massacre, brings new urgency to the matter.

The issue has stirred strong opinions since The Fayetteville Observer reported it earlier this week. Some readers say the city shouldn't try to erase unpleasant aspects of its past or ignore historical achievements. The site of the Market House is where North Carolina ratified the U.S. Constitution.



Market House plaque

This plaque, dedicated by the Fayetteville City Council in 1989, says slaves were sold where the Market House stands.

A plaque on the Market House says it honors the memory of individuals "sold as slaves at this place." The original building at the site burned in a 1831 fire. It was replaced with the present structure, now a museum.

The plaque was based on research by the late Fayetteville historian Roy Parker Jr. and retired educator William T. Brown, who were unable to quantify the number of slaves brought to the location and sold.

When he was associate superintendent of the then city schools in the 1980s, Brown had the Market House removed from high school diplomas.

Brown, who is 86, said he hopes the City Council will follow in the same footsteps.

"Just do not use it," Brown said. "I hope they will do that, without any protests marching in the street. I don't like that kind of thing."

A city councilman, Mitch Colvin, said he and other council members had already been discussing privately the need to rebrand the city's image. He said such a project needs to include finding a new city symbol. He said he doesn't want the subject to become more divisive.

"Hopefully, cooler heads prevail," Colvin said. "We cannot go back and rewrite history, but it's time to start having a new discussion."

In January 1990, the City Council debated the wording of the plaque before voting 5-4 to put it on the Market House. Proponents said then the plaque would memorialize slaves sold in the county, while opponents worried the marker would unfairly characterize the building as once being a slave market.

Mayor Nat Robertson was then a council member who voted against the plaque. According to the minutes, Robertson asked staff where the money would come from to pay for the plaque. The city manager said he didn't know.

On Wednesday, Robertson said his dissenting vote was based on questions about the cost and funding source for the plaque.

Robertson said that when he was on the council in the early 1990s, he voted for the city to adopt its current maroon script with its exaggerated letter Y as an alternative to the Market House logo.

"I don't believe we should try to erase our history but instead learn by it and our mistakes, so that we may continue to celebrate our diversity," Robertson said in a statement Wednesday.

Robertson said Fayetteville is a diverse city, and neither a divisive nor racist community.

Robertson's opponent in this year's mayoral race, Val Applewhite, who filed Wednesday, said she is less concerned about a logo and more interested in improving race relations across the city.

"And I think that's what leadership does," she said. "You tackle the hard issues. We can't pretend like

it's going to go away."

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