



The Executive Committee  
University of Toronto Students' Union  
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### **Letter of Support for Renaming Russell Street**

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the University of Toronto Students' Union, please accept this letter as an endorsement for the work done on renaming Russell Street on the University of Toronto St. George campus.

The University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) represents over 38,000 full-time undergraduate students at the University of Toronto St George Campus by providing services and advocating on their behalf.

Russell Street is named after Peter Russell, the first Receiver and Auditor General of Upper Canada. Despite Russell's status as an "important figure" in Canada's early history, Russell was corrupt, self-serving, and an individual who both owned and trafficked slaves. Russell was a major figure in the opposition to Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe's effort to abolish slavery in Upper Canada. This eventually resulted in the first legislation in the British Empire to actively limit slavery, but was watered down due to the influences of Russell and other administrators.

Russell was a corrupt administrator, and one of the colony's biggest slave owners. Russell Street is one of three roads named after him in central Toronto -- the others being Peter Street and Russell Hill Road. The renaming of Russell Street would more accurately reflect the accomplishments of individuals who have truly contributed to the University of Toronto community and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

It is the opinion of the UTSU Executive Committee that this street should be renamed. Any decisions made should consider the fact that Russell owned slaves, and that a street in the heart of one of Canada's great universities should not be named after an advocate of slavery. We support the project and campaign currently being undertaken to rename Russell Street. For a change as important as this would be to our University and our student body, very little would be impacted save for the changing of addresses at select buildings on what is currently Russell Street.

Yours in service,

The University of Toronto Union Students' Union Executive

# Time to change Toronto street named after slavery advocate

By Michael Valpy  
 Opinion  
 March 8, 2018



Canada’s 23rd annual Black History Month has come and gone with no demands by University of Toronto students to remove the name of Russell St. from the short thoroughfare passing through the heart of the main campus. It is an event — rather the absence of an event — that speaks to the ethics of place and belonging and arguably to the deficiencies of multiculturalism.

Peter Russell, for whom the street (one of three streets in Toronto, actually) is named, was appointed in 1796 the first administrator of colonial Upper Canada, today’s Ontario.

He was considered competent but not one of historical Ontario’s great personages. He was an addicted gambler who needed to hide from his creditors and spent time in debtors’ prison.

His contemporaries accused him of being greedy for fees and offices (he appointed himself a judge despite having no legal training). He acquired 3,000 hectares of land through government grants and he and his half-sister Elizabeth were said by a chronicler of the time to “live together as man and wife.”

Most significantly, he was one of the colony’s biggest slave owners and led a successful political resistance to Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe’s efforts to abolish slavery in Upper Canada from the date of the colony’s creation in 1791.

So. Named for a slave owner and advocate of slavery: A street in the middle of Canada’s largest university in the province with Canada’s largest black population in a country that celebrates — dubiously — the equalities of multiculturalism.

The naming of public structures or raising of monuments for people whose histories are viewed by segments of the Canadian population in the 21st century as distasteful has become an issue. Think Edward Cornwallis, John A. Macdonald, Hector-Louis Langevin and others.

The question raised is whether there is a legitimate right to navigate change without effacing the past. On the one hand, history is a record of things from the past that should not be forgotten. On the other hand, history is a commemoration of expressed values, and a change in the way a community memorializes its past offers a way to recognize important alterations in the community's values.

Emilie Nicolas, a Haitien-Quebecker and co-founder and president of Québec Inclusif, recently wrote a powerful essay for the Institute of Canadian Citizenship on the notion of home as an ethical space. "When our [black] communities are underserved, impoverished, criminalized, over-policed, over-incarcerated, under-represented, and deported; every time, the same message is sent, over and over. You are not here to stay. Your presence is temporary. You are merely passing through. You do not belong. Your belonging is a threat."

A street named for a slave-owner in the heart of Canada's largest university is not synonymous with the ethical definition of home. It provides an excellent opportunity for employing the Witt test — named for Yale historian John Fabian Witt who recently chaired a Yale University committee on renaming university public structures commemorating people of undesirable values.

The committee proposed that several questions be asked in each case, among them:

- Is a principal legacy of the namesake fundamentally at odds with the mission of the university?
- Was the principal legacy significantly contested in the time and place in which the namesake lived?
- At the time of a naming, would the honouring have been fundamentally at odds with the university's or municipality's mission?
- If the street name is to be altered, will it have the effect of erasing history?

Peter Russell's principal legacy is that he was Upper Canada's first administrator — which really says nothing about him — and an advocate of slavery which is at odds with the values of University of Toronto and the city. Was this legacy contested in Russell's lifetime? Yes. Was it at odds with the values of the university and city at the time the street was named? Probably. Will changing the street name have the effect of erasing history. No.

March 21 is International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination — an excellent occasion to give Russell St. a new name.

*Michael Valpy is a senior fellow, Massey College, and fellow, School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto.*