Exclusive   Politics   Victoria   Local council

This was published 9 months ago

'Shocked' Melbourne council to change name after discovering slavery link

By **Michael Fowler**

Updated November 24, 2021 — 6.28pm, first published at 4.25pm

Moreland City Council in Melbourne's north will commit to changing its name after being made aware that the title came from a Jamaican sugar plantation that used slave labour.

The proposal, likely to be voted on at a council meeting in December, was briefed to councillors on Tuesday evening by new Greens mayor Mark Riley and the council's chief executive.

Moreland City Council will change its name after discovering links to a Jamaican slave plantation.
JASON SOUTH

The pair met with a community group that includes Indigenous elders and former federal MP Phil Cleary last week, who briefed them on the links.

"We are shocked and deeply saddened to learn that 27 years ago Moreland was named after a slave estate. The history behind the naming of this area is painful, uncomfortable and very wrong. It needs to be addressed," Cr Riley said.

"Moreland stands firmly against racism, we are one community, proudly diverse. Council is committed to working with Wurundjeri people, and we take the request very seriously."

Scotsman Farquhar McCrae arrived in Melbourne in 1839 and named land from Moonee Ponds Creek to Sydney Road after the Jamaican sugar plantation his family owned.

The City of Moreland includes suburbs such as Brunswick (pictured) and Coburg. PAUL JEFFERS

The plantation had as many as 700 slaves at any one time in the decades after it was founded in the 1780s. Dr McCrae used the Moreland name six years after Britain made slavery illegal in 1833.

The City of Moreland will become the latest organisation to address its colonial history through a name change, after the NSW government committed earlier this month to renaming Ben Boyd National Park.

The park, which covers 8900 hectares on the NSW South Coast, was named after infamous Scottish blackbirder Benjamin Boyd. The state government intends to assign an Indigenous name that recognises the area's Aboriginal cultural heritage.

The Moreland name – also used on a prominent road in Melbourne's inner-north – was assigned to the council in 1994 as part of the Kennett government's amalgamations. The area includes the suburbs of Brunswick, Coburg and Pascoe Vale.

In a statement, Cr Riley said the council was not considering a change to the name of any other features in the Moreland area, including roads or schools.

It has not committed to a timeline or detailed the exact process, although the state government will be the final signatory on a change.

Independent Moreland councillor Oscar Yildiz raised concerns over the process, questioning why Cr Riley had announced plans to change the name before consulting the community.

"His intentions are good, but he was elected on the Wednesday and two days later he was holding these discussions," Cr Yildiz said.

Moreland councillor Oscar Yildiz. JOE ARMAO

"If I'm a ratepayer who discovers this happening, I'm thinking 'mate, how about you try and focus on something that will give residents [an] immediate return?'

"I don't think councillors should be making such a massive decision without any consultation so far."

A report on the proposal will be presented at the council's next meeting on December 8.

Zoe Laidlaw, a history professor at Melbourne University and an expert in British imperialism and colonialism, said slavery was common in Jamaica in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with about 300,000 enslaved people there at the end of the 18th century.

She said Britain set aside £20 million, "an enormous sum at the time", to compensate slave owners once it was outlawed in 1833.

"People like Farquhar McCrae came to the Australian colonies and often named their estate, after plantations in the West Indies. In this case, it was a celebration of slavery after it was illegal," she said.

The link to the Jamaican estate was not a new revelation, Professor Laidlaw said. She photographed a sign on Moreland Road last year that noted its link to Dr McCrae's grandfather's estate in Jamaica.

She added that when changing the names of public places, it was important to acknowledge in some way what the previous name was and explain the historical circumstances behind the original title.

"If you simply get rid of names, you risk obscuring histories that maybe we should confront," she said.

"These topics are always something that have the potential to be quite fraught because people have very different views and they are not always very well historically informed views."

Indigenous community leader Andrew Gardiner, part of the group that lobbied the City of Moreland to change the name, said the elders of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung – the traditional occupants of the land – were shocked to discover the name came from a slave plantation.

"That it was then used to name land stolen in the catastrophic displacement, dispossession and discrimination that swept our people from their timeless homelands adds to the hurt," he said.

Mr Cleary, the former independent federal MP for Wills – once former prime minister Bob Hawke's seat – labelled the Moreland name "insensitive and disrespectful".

"It was imposed on the community without consultation and without due diligence that would have quickly identified its doubly racist origins: slavery and dispossession," he said.

"Retaining this name for the primary civic body is untenable."

Local Government Minister Shaun Leane said renaming Moreland was something "that needs to be worked on by Moreland City Council, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Corporation and the local community".

"Strong collaboration with traditional owner groups is vital as we progress our nation-leading path to treaty, truth and justice."

*Fascinating answers to perplexing questions delivered to your inbox every week. **Sign up to get our new Explainer newsletter here**.*

Michael Fowler is a former reporter with The Age who is now travelling the world. Connect via Twitter or email.