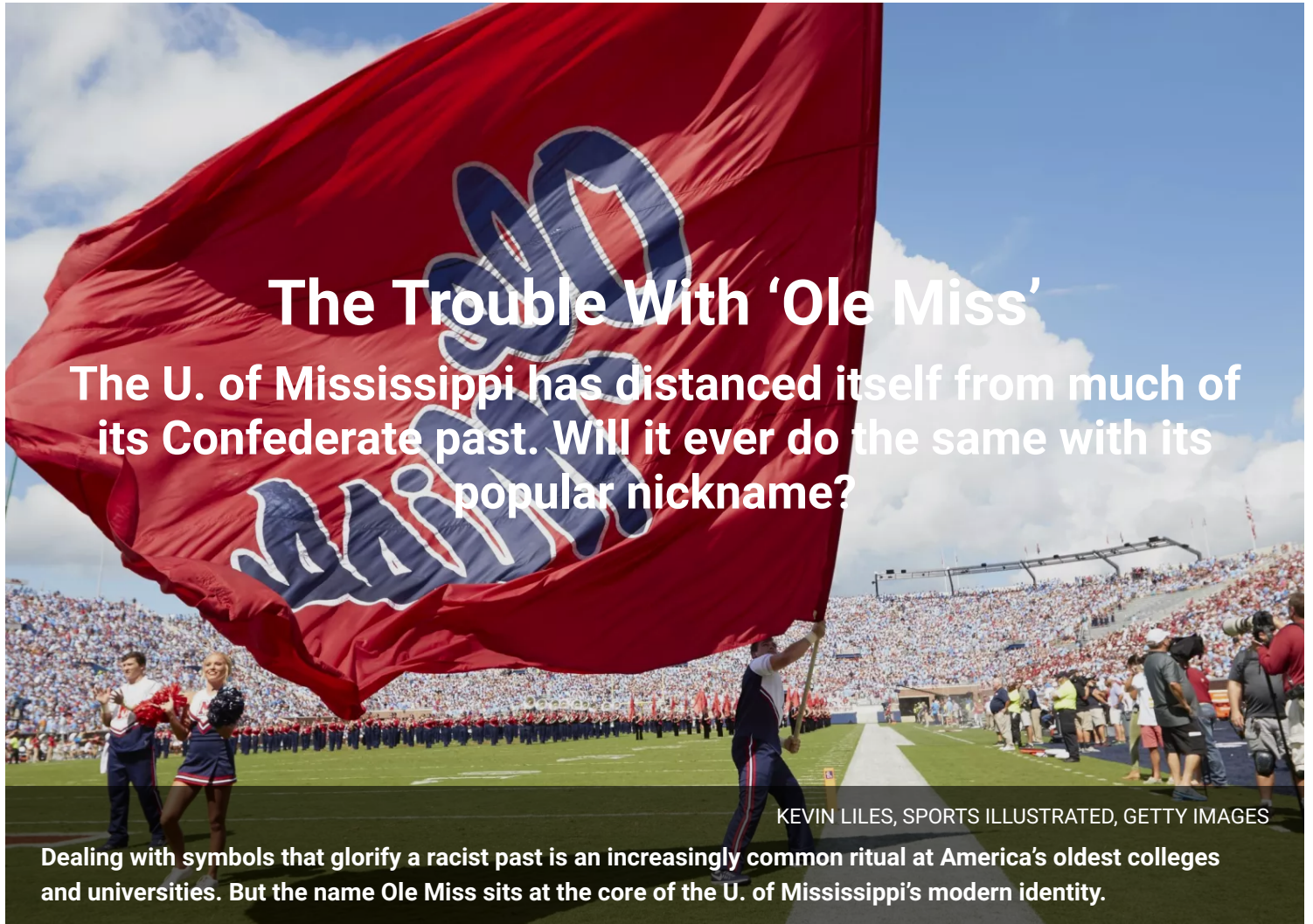


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



The Trouble With 'Ole Miss'

The U. of Mississippi has distanced itself from much of its Confederate past. Will it ever do the same with its popular nickname?

KEVIN LILES, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, GETTY IMAGES

Dealing with symbols that glorify a racist past is an increasingly common ritual at America's oldest colleges and universities. But the name Ole Miss sits at the core of the U. of Mississippi's modern identity.

THE SHADOW OF SLAVERY

By *Marc Parry*

NOVEMBER 8, 2019

Oxford, Miss.

emar Tisby has an unusual problem for a graduate student: He is so troubled by his university's widely used nickname that he refuses to use it. A black doctoral student in history at the flagship public university of a state that is 38 percent black, Tisby speaks all 11 syllables of the official name, the University of Mississippi, to avoid saying Ole Miss. He can't take full pride in this campus because it embraces the nickname. He won't buy Ole Miss swag.

His reason: "Ole Miss" is what enslaved people called the wife of their owner. The term, to Tisby, evokes the degrading hierarchy of plantation life. It "harkens back to a day when black people were considered property, and is a constant reminder that the university, the state, and the nation at large has yet to reckon with its racist history," he says.

That reckoning may be coming. The University of Mississippi is at an inflection point in its decades-long struggle to disentangle itself from racially offensive symbols. It retired the Colonel Reb mascot, silenced the football staple "Dixie," disavowed the Confederate flag, lowered the Confederate-themed state flag, and placed its Confederate statue on a path to relocation. Now some students, professors, and outside scholars are calling for the university to finally confront what some describe as "the third rail": its name.

The university's leaders know the nickname is a problem. Their own consultants told them that years ago. They're also keen to promote a more inclusive environment at an institution that remains plagued by racist episodes. But they face pressure from wealthy alumni who oppose changing symbols, as well as from within a campus Greek system that is also perceived as wedded to Old South traditions. The university has responded by acting like the problem doesn't exist.

There are no sit-ins about changing the Ole Miss name, no marches, no shouting into megaphones, at least not yet. This emergent confrontation is still a small collection of voices. What they want is to puncture the silence that preserves the status quo.

Dealing with symbols that glorify a racist past is an increasingly common ritual at America's oldest colleges and universities. Yale [stripped](#) pro-slavery ideologue John C. Calhoun's name from a residential college. Georgetown [renamed](#) two buildings that had honored priests who orchestrated the sale of hundreds of slaves. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [exploded](#) in protests that toppled a Confederate monument known as "Silent Sam."

But Ole Miss, unlike those symbols, sits at the core of the University of Mississippi's modern identity. It embodies, for many students and alumni, the collective spirit of the campus. It blazes across news releases, parking decals, shirts, billboards, stadium walls, football helmets, pencils, and even the university's web domain and email addresses. It passes through the lips of thousands of people every day. Even some who loathe the term catch themselves saying it.

Ole Miss presents the most extreme test of what has become a universal question: How far is a college willing to go to cleanse itself of symbols associated with slavery and white supremacy?



TIMOTHY IVY FOR *THE CHRONICLE*

The widely used nickname for the U. of Mississippi is ever-present on campus. It's emblazoned across news releases, parking decals, shirts, football helmets, and pencils. But the reckoning for the nickname, which “harkens back to a day when black people were considered property,” may be coming.

The university's official story about the origins of its nickname pops up in a series of puzzling fragments spread across its website.

When, in 2014, then-Chancellor Daniel W. Jones [announced a plan](#) to improve the campus's racial climate, he conceded in a memo that “some express concern” about the name's origin, “believing that the term is racist.” He didn't elaborate in his own words. [Elsewhere on the site](#), the name is credited to a late 19th-century student, Elma Meek. It was Meek who suggested calling the yearbook “Ole Miss,” the site says, which “subsequently became synonymous” with the university. End of story.

But why would Meek want to christen a yearbook with a phrase rooted in slavery? To answer that question, it's helpful first to step back and consider the wider context: the story of how, during Meek's lifetime, white Americans airbrushed the brutality of the system.

THE MISSISSIPPIAN

Ole Miss Takes Its Name From Darksy Dialect, Not Abbreviation Of State

**Name Was Suggested By Miss Elma Meek Of Oxford
Early In Century As Title for Yearbook; Has
Since Applied to School Itself**

Although the deep-South is intimately acquainted with the University of Mississippi as "Ole Miss," a cognomen as colorful and traditional as the institution itself, many from other sections of the country believe the pet name a shortening of the title "Ole Mississippi," and actually, only a handful are aware of the circumstances under which the sobriquet first came into being.

In recent years the university's football team has been a widely traveled eleven, and heralding the Red and Blue into town on numerous occasions have been streamers that carried the words "Ole Mississippi."

Old Mississippi

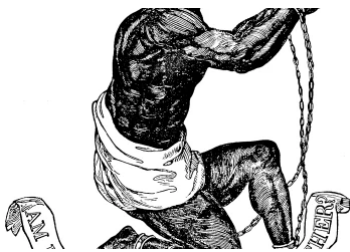
But the "Ole Mississippi" idea played on part in devising the cognomen.

who, under the leadership of that gallant student-soldier, William Berry Lowry, resigned their college labors to battle for the cause of their fathers.

The yearbook still appears today under the same title, but the name has long since been used to apply to the whole university. The phrase is used erroneously in distant places to apply to the whole state of Mississippi in a manner which is resented by the supporters of the institution. To them the name "Ole Miss" is the valued possession of the University of Mississippi, and the inspiration which brought it in the mind of Miss Elma Meek in 1896 was an outstanding event in the history of the institution.

A 1939 article in *The Mississippian* features an interview with Elma Meek, of Oxford, who said she suggested the name Ole Miss for the U. of Mississippi yearbook. The article states that “the name has long since been used to apply to the whole university.”

That narrative is complex, but a thumbnail sketch goes like this. When the Civil War ended in 1865, a struggle began over how to remember slavery. At first, victorious Northerners adopted the view that it had been evil. Newly freed black people, enfranchised during Reconstruction, had substantial power to mold the public memory of slavery. But many white Southerners promoted the fantasy that plantations had been humane places where caring masters tutored happy slaves in the rudiments of civilization and kept them from their natural idleness and criminality.



NEWS

Reckoning With Slavery

May 25, 2017

By the late 19th century, through fraud, terrorism, and political deal-making, white Southerners had demolished the Reconstruction experiment in multiracial democracy and “redeemed” the South for generations of white supremacist rule. As white Northerners and Southerners linked arms in a spirit of reconciliation, both embraced the idea of black inferiority and accepted the myth of a benign slavery. Black leaders and intellectuals like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson fought those distortions. But the cultural and political headwinds overpowered them.

As the lawyer and racial-justice activist Bryan Stevenson [has said](#), “The North won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative war.”

The University of Mississippi’s metamorphosis into “Ole Miss” was one small part of that narrative war. In 1896, an interfraternity group initiated the project of creating a new yearbook, and students at the university were asked to propose names for it. Elma Meek borrowed her suggestion “from the language of the Ante-bellum ‘Darkey,’ who

knew the wife of his owner by no other title than ‘Ole Miss,’” as the student newspaper, then called *The Mississippian*, [reported in two articles from the 1930s](#). The paper’s account, based on an interview with Meek, explained that she had selected the name Ole Miss because “it connoted all the admiration and reverence accorded the womanhood of the Old South.” Within two years of the yearbook’s 1897 debut, Ole Miss had become shorthand for the university.

The point of the moniker was “to compare the university to the mistress of the antebellum plantation,” says Jack Carey, a historian at the University of Alabama who has written about the history of the Ole Miss name. The university, like the plantation mistress, was seen as something to be cherished, respected, and shown deference. Carey, an instructor in Alabama’s American-studies department, describes the name Ole Miss as “a Southerner-of-the-1890s version of *alma mater*, or nourishing mother.”

“Why do you want to go to a university that says it’s progressive but has all of these symbols around of hate?”

But the “appalling” notion that Ole Miss “would evoke real and meaningful emotional attachments,” he says, was only possible due to the larger project of sentimentalizing slavery. The term, as Carey, who earned his doctorate from the University of Mississippi, [writes in a 2016 dissertation](#) about the institution’s history, conjured “images of contented slaves who respected their masters and loved their mistresses.” Anne Twitty, a slavery historian at the University of Mississippi, calls Ole Miss an “imagined term of endearment.”

“The only reason a white person suggests the name Ole Miss for the University of Mississippi is because they think enslaved people loved the Ole Miss,” says Twitty, who has researched the phrase’s history. “The term doesn’t make any sense as a suggestion unless you have fully bought into the idea that slaves loved their slavery.”

The narrative of loyal and contented slaves was a recurring motif of the Southern mythology known as the “lost cause,” which ennobled secession as a battle for states’ rights, not the maintenance of slavery. The lost cause inspired the United Daughters of the Confederacy and its allies to install hundreds of Confederate statues in prominent public spaces from the 1890s on. The University of Mississippi’s [monument](#) of a rifle-equipped Confederate soldier, erected at the entrance to campus in 1906, was one of them. Flagship public universities in Texas, Virginia, Alabama, and North Carolina dedicated similar memorials through the 1930s. Professional historians buttressed the lost cause with purportedly “scientific” scholarship.

The statues were going up “at the very time that all of the states of the former Confederacy are either rewriting their voting laws or creating entirely new constitutions to disenfranchise African Americans,” says Carey, who is working on a book on Southern flagships in the Jim Crow era. “And these things are going up at places that are producing the ideas and the scientific knowledge used to justify the Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement.”

With the Confederate statue and related symbols, says Carey, white Mississippians grounded the university’s identity in a romanticized Southern past even as they built it into a modern institution dedicated to the Jim Crow project of white advancement. For black people, says Twitty, the Ole Miss name delivered the same message through language that the statue did through marble: You are not welcome here.



TIMOTHY IVY FOR *THE CHRONICLE*

Charles K. Ross, a professor of history and African American studies, co-leads a university group researching the institution's ties to slavery. He says the phrase Ole Miss is a symbol of white power.

Efforts to contend with the monument's white-supremacist history have provoked years of well-publicized controversy. The university's 2016 push to [contextualize the monument](#) with a historical sign triggered [objections](#) from the Mississippi Sons of Confederate Veterans, who mounted an unsuccessful [legal campaign](#) to remove the sign, as well as from students and professors, who faulted the sign for sidestepping slavery's role in the Civil War. The university tried substituting a [blunter plaque](#). But instead of quelling the tension, that step was followed by a cycle of student [marches against the statue](#) and neo-Confederate demonstrations [defending it](#).

It was only this year, when student leaders [worked across racial and party lines](#) to build support for relocating the icon to a cemetery on university grounds, that [the](#)

[mess was resolved](#). Sort of. Their plan, though [backed by the administration](#), must still clear a series of state hurdles. Chief among them: approval by the statewide governing body for colleges, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. Its board is appointed by the state's governor, Phil Bryant, a term-limited Republican who belonged to the Sons of Confederate Veterans "[as recently as 2017,](#)" according to [Mississippi Today](#).

But the Ole Miss name, which is rooted in a history arguably more grotesque than the statue's, receives far less attention. Misinformation thrives in the vacuum. One 2014 [article](#) in a local news outlet sought to debunk the slave story and map an alternate history that traced the roots of Ole Miss to a shortening of the state's name, as well as to a train that may have dropped students off at the university. The institution's [Wikipedia page](#) characterizes Ole Miss's slave origins as the unverified theorizing of "some historians." Many students, white and black, are unaware that Ole Miss derives from slavery.

Charles K. Ross demonstrated that ignorance while walking across campus one sunny afternoon last fall. Ross, who has a booming voice and salt-and-pepper beard, is a professor of African American studies and history who co-leads a [university group](#) researching the institution's ties to slavery. He stopped passing black students dressed in Ole Miss shirts, asking each of them the same question: "What does Ole Miss mean?"

"What does it mean?" replied one student, a sophomore from the Mississippi River Delta region who studies social work. "Uhhhhhhhhh."

"Don't know?" Ross said.

"I sure don't," she said.

After he told her, the student expressed astonishment.

“Don’t worry about it — they don’t want you to necessarily know that,” Ross said. “Because it’s become something that the university is using ... to help kind of separate it from Mississippi State. ... Particularly for many white alumni, it’s very, very, very powerful. It’s a unifying thing because it’s kind of a distinctive term.”

This scene encapsulates how Ross perceives the phrase Ole Miss: as a symbol of white power. Historically, he says in an interview, Ole Miss embodied a relationship in which black people were forced to address whites with deference, even as whites might call them “boy.” Today, the fact that black people wear Ole Miss gear, he says, is a testament to whites’ enduring grip over university traditions.

Black students, he says, either don’t know about the name, or, if they do, dismiss it. They face what he describes as a kind of bargain. They view the university as a place that has always had racial strife — a place that worked hard to keep them out from 1848 to 1962. Their relatives might have warned them against attending it. But they want to take advantage of its education, perhaps even to play football and reach the NFL. They resign themselves to symbols like Ole Miss. They feel they can’t fight every battle.

Ross, who studies the history of black football players, refuses to wear clothes that say “Ole Miss” or “Rebels,” the Confederate-rooted name of the university’s athletic teams. “Here we are in the 21st century ... we’re asking African American males to put on a helmet that basically has a direct connotation of slavery,” he says.

Critics feel that such symbols — along with racist acts like the time in 2014 that students [hung a noose](#) and Confederate flag around a statue honoring James Meredith, whose 1962 bid to integrate the university sparked a riot — prevent other black students from ever stepping foot on campus. Only 13 percent of the student body is black, against 38 percent of the state population. No other state has a larger gulf between the percentage of its public high-school graduates who are black and the

percentage of black freshmen at its flagship public university, according to a 2018 [*Hechinger Report*](#) analysis.

“Obviously, something is not right,” says Matthew Powell, a history major from Mississippi who is involved in developing campus tours about the university’s historical connections to slavery.

“African Americans are not coming to the flagship university that their taxes pay for,” says Powell, who is white. “And the reason is: Why do you want to go to a university that says it’s progressive but has all of these symbols around of hate? And that’s what Ole Miss is.”



GETTY IMAGES

Charles K. Ross, a professor in the history department, refuses to wear clothes that say Ole Miss or “Rebels,” the Confederate-rooted name of the university’s athletic teams: “We’re asking African American males to put on a helmet that basically has a direct connotation of slavery.”

Administrators put a different spin on Ole Miss. Their statements acknowledge the name's history — to a point — but imply that the past doesn't matter. The name carries a different meaning now.

In 2014, Jones, then the chancellor, [announced a plan](#) to improve the campus's racial climate, based on a wide-ranging review that included its symbols. This followed a series of racist episodes, notably the symbolic lynching of Meredith in 2014 and a [protest](#) against Barack Obama's 2012 re-election, which involved racial epithets and burning signs. Jones's announcement, along with a [follow-up public letter](#) from his successor, Jeffrey S. Vitter, made three points about the name.

First, administrators emphasized that the “vast majority” of alumni and students — including “current students of all races” — embrace the moniker Ole Miss. Most members of the university community “do not associate its use with race in any way.” Rather, Ole Miss describes “an esprit de corps that binds members of the UM community together,” the university said. “To be a member of the Ole Miss community means to effect positive change, challenge the status quo, protect and dignify the rights of every individual, and advance ideas that are innovative and transformational.”

“I can assure you that we will continue to use the terms Ole Miss and Rebels as endearing nicknames for the university.”

Alumnae like Cara Troiani echo that. “I’m proud we don’t use the flag anymore and have made other changes, but I still think of my university as Ole Miss,” the 2010 graduate [told](#) *The Clarion-Ledger* newspaper. “Once you’ve graduated and been on that campus and know the school spirit that’s been there, you never leave Ole Miss.”

Second, administrators stressed that beyond campus, Ole Miss is a well-known, warmly regarded, and even “envied” college brand. A national study, Jones's memo

said, showed that the name Ole Miss does not have a greater association with “negative racial history” than the University of Mississippi does. Respondents preferred Ole Miss by a significant margin. Ole Miss is seven times more popular than the University of Mississippi in web searches about the university.

And third, Jones endorsed the nickname’s continued use. Vitter expressed that position even more forcefully in his 2016 letter.

“Many individuals I’ve talked with felt that our efforts to create a welcoming environment at the university would somehow ultimately lead to restricting use of the term Ole Miss Rebels,” Vitter wrote. “I can assure you that we will continue to use the terms Ole Miss and Rebels as endearing nicknames for the university.”

But those statements largely glossed over the underlying tension about the name unearthed by two outside consultants whom Jones had brought in from Richmond, Va., to review the university’s symbols. Edward L. Ayers, a historian, and Christy Coleman, a museum executive, spoke with alumni, students, professors, athletics officials, administrators, and community leaders. They found plenty of affection for the name, especially among students. But they also noted how others on campus viewed it as a drag on progress.

“Building a dialect version of ‘old’ into an institution that is built to prepare for the future strikes them as inherently problematic,” the consultants [wrote in their report](#). “Some of those who love ‘Ole Miss’ recognize that the name grew from an antebellum past of slavery; some think it has been transcended by the progress of the decades since the university’s integration, while others think that it continually pulls Mississippi back into the past.”

The consultants pointed out that faculty, staff, and students chafed at being forced to use “olemiss.edu” email addresses as they conducted official business such as recommendation letters and job and grant applications. Professors deemed that “a

signal to the outside world that the university is a place that embraces notions of the old south and its historically exclusionary practices,” the consultants wrote.

Ayers and Coleman also noted something else: Many people they met with, whatever their opinions, hesitated to talk about the name, “knowing that it is beloved by many alumni and inscribed in the university’s popular identity.” *The Chronicle* encountered something similar in reporting this article. Some interviewees responded tentatively to questions or asked to speak off the record.

Ayers, a former president of the University of Richmond, says he intended his report to help spark a broad public conversation about the name. Ayers rejects the idea that the name’s past can be set aside because some now believe its old connotations have been transcended. He quotes Mississippi’s most famous writer, William Faulkner, whose Oxford home is owned by the university: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Ayers thinks that the institution should refer to itself as the University of Mississippi in areas within its control. “To forfeit the opportunity to be unifying your state with the state name, and to have the nickname be something that echoes the worst parts of the state’s past, is ‘lose-lose,’” he says. “You’re losing an opportunity. But you’re also carrying a burden that you don’t need to carry.”

Presented with the report from Ayers and Coleman, Jones responded by recommending, as the consultants suggested, that the university “consider the implications of calling itself ‘Ole Miss’ in various contexts.” Ole Miss should be used for athletics and school spirit, his memo said. The University of Mississippi should prevail for academics. Professors who don’t like the email addresses, the university added later, can use personal accounts.

The broad public conversation envisioned by Ayers never happened.

“Alumni feel as though there is a gradual process of taking away the things they value.”

The Chronicle reached out to a university spokesman, Rod Guajardo, to try to interview administrators who could discuss the Ole Miss name. After initially offering phone calls with two administrators, he later canceled them 15 minutes before they were expected to begin. Instead, he substituted a statement from the university’s new chancellor, Glenn Boyce.

“The nickname Ole Miss is a term of affection, and it is inherent to the university’s identity,” Boyce says. “It carries strong, positive national and international recognition. We understand the complex history of its origins as documented by our university’s late historian, Dr. David Sansing, and others. Since that time, the nickname has been adopted as a source of pride by countless students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of the university around the world. Today, the name Ole Miss is widely known and respected. Ole Miss is and will continue to be the nickname used by the university.”

Boyce’s statement was accompanied by a piece written by Sansing, a late emeritus professor of history at the university who wrote what officials consider their institution’s [definitive history](#). It presents a less condemnatory version of what is essentially the same Elma Meek origin story cited by other historians. Absent, in Sansing’s account, is any discussion of “Ole Miss” as a phrase of deference forced upon black people, or as an “imagined term of endearment” that sentimentalized slavery.

Ole Miss “was a term of respect and endearment for the mistress of the plantation used by slaves in antebellum Mississippi,” Sansing writes in “Ole Miss: The Origin and Meaning of the Term,” a chapter in his 2018 [collection](#) of articles, speeches, and lectures, *The Other Mississippi: A State in Conflict With Itself*. Many former slaves, he writes, continued to use the term “in reference to the mistress of the household.”

Sansing, a white Mississippi native who died in July at 86, cites a 1930s-era interview with one former slave, Barney Alford, “who spoke in glowing terms of the *Ole Missus* of his plantation.” In suggesting Ole Miss, Sansing writes, Meek “did not intend to reminisce or regale slavery. She wanted to preserve the high regard accorded Southern women.”



ZUMAPRESS.COM/NEWS.COM

U. of Mississippi students Tyler Yarbrough and Curtis Hill hold the bullet-riddled sign that memorializes Emmett Till in front of the Confederate statue on campus on the eve of the dedication for a new, bulletproof sign.

It isn't hard to guess why administrators might prefer to avoid discussion of the nickname. Ayers and Coleman, in summarizing their talks with various campus constituencies, described donors' displeasure over steps already taken to eliminate symbols like the Colonel Reb mascot, a caricature of a plantation owner.

Fundraising and alumni-affairs officials told the two consultants that “devoted alumni” deem such changes an “assault” on the university’s heritage.

“Alumni feel as though there is a gradual process of taking away the things they value,” Ayers and Coleman wrote, “and often ask staff, ‘What’s next? Ole Miss? Rebels?’” Fund-raising and alumni officials, the consultants wrote, “view any change in those two names as real deal breakers that could irreparably harm the University.”

The university got a taste of how emotional this could get in the response to Jones’s modest 2014 suggestion that it should strive to use Ole Miss for athletics and school spirit and not for academics. His plan touched off alumni and student [discontent on social media](#). In a widely shared [open letter](#) to Jones, a student, Emma Jennings, suggested that potential steps such as changing the email addresses to “umiss.edu,” as Ayers and Coleman had encouraged Jones to consider, indicated that the university was embarrassed about its history.

“While the University of Mississippi has a history that we may not be proud of as modern Americans, the best approach is not to do what we can to erase the past,” Jennings wrote. “While it may seem like a noble idea to restrict ‘Ole Miss’ to the athletic field, the fact is that I will continue to refer to the school as Ole Miss no matter what. Does this make me a racist? Or does this make me a student that is fond of the nickname (or simply fond of fewer syllables)?”

Campus leaders feel stripping away a beloved symbol like Ole Miss could leave a void that damages the university’s ability to sustain itself, says Jeffrey T. Jackson, who chairs the department of sociology and anthropology and co-runs the slavery research group. “You lose your donors, you lose your endowments, you lose your students,” he says. “And pretty soon the whole thing is an economic train wreck. That’s the fear.”

Ross, his faculty colleague in the slavery study group, hopes that pressure, perhaps from students, will ultimately push the administration to eliminate Ole Miss, Rebels,

and every other racially insensitive symbol. To make the university, as he phrases it, “racially clean.”

This summer, the University of Mississippi was embroiled in yet another racial controversy. A [photo emerged](#) of fraternity members wielding guns in front of a bullet-riddled memorial sign to Emmett Till, the black 14-year-old lynched in the state in 1955. Larry D. Sparks, then the interim chancellor, responded with a [statement](#) saying their actions “do not represent the values of our institution.”

Carey, the alumnus and Alabama historian, says the university should back up that statement by ending what he calls the “game of acting like the name is just this thing that’s always been there.” The university should initiate a public conversation about the name, one that situates its adoption within the larger project of deliberately creating an identity that tied the institution to the Old South. That process, says Tisby, the doctoral student, should involve a clear and accessible statement from the university about the history of the term Ole Miss, which should become part of student orientation.

The implications, says Carey, would be enormous.

“I can’t imagine a university putting out a statement that says, ‘This is what the name comes from — and we’re cool with that.’”

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