

Roberta DiMezza

From: Ben S. <dreamfinder@gmail.com>
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To: Roberta DiMezza
Subject: RI House Committee on Judiciary - Committee Testimony - House Resolution No. 8077

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I submit this letter in **opposition** to House Resolution No. 8077, the resolution calling for a popular referendum on the name of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

This question was posed to the Rhode Island electorate in 2010, only 10 years ago, when it was soundly opposed 250,466 votes to 71,162. No credible scholarly research has been conducted in the intervening 10 years to revise our historical understanding of the origin and meaning of the phrase “Providence Plantations” as it pertains to Roger Williams and the early colonists’ efforts to found a refuge of religious freedom, or to substantially enhance our understanding of Rhode Island’s role in the slave trade. The only thing that has changed in the past 10 years has been an unusual, slowly-growing groundswell of societal discord and disharmony that has seen contemporary mores applied retroactively to historical figures and events, in which statues of Christopher Columbus have been toppled, statues of Frederick Douglass been stolen, threats to deface Mount Rushmore have been brazenly made, and now, a threat to strip “and Providence Plantations” from the name of the state in which many of us were born has been made.

This proposed name change would do many things, both symbolic and practical. It would permanently alter the words printed on birth certificates issued to citizens of this state, and the subtext to this change would be, “we were born in a state that at one time had a racist and offensive name.” This may be viewed as an attack on not just the identity of our state itself, but on the identity of its very citizens who remain proud to have been born in the “smallest state with the longest name.” Rhode Island public schools taught (at least through the 1990s – I am not sure if they still do) that Rhode Island had a shameful legacy of slave trading, but also that our foundational ideals were based in the highest virtues of religious freedom, and that we, like the rest of the United States, inevitably faced the sins of the past head-on to chart a brighter future. Knowledge of Rhode Island’s links to the slave trade is integral to understanding how far we as a state and a society have come. Stripping “and Providence Plantations” from the official state name, despite the etymological origin of “Plantations” as used in this context not pertaining *in any respect* to African chattel slavery, and notwithstanding the practice of African chattel slavery within the bounds of the colony and state prior to the Civil War, only clouds and obfuscates the historical awareness of slavery under a blanket woven of ignorance and disrespect to the intelligence of our people. The meaning and impact of words may change over time, but historical facts do not, and the aspirational nature of Rhode Island’s founding, original charter, and identity, and its name “State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations,” are not and should not be up for debate.

Further, the Governor’s, Treasurer’s, and General Assembly’s unilateral attempts to suppress the official, legal name of the state (not so much on websites, which are allowed a certain amount of “artistic license” as a matter

of practical policy, but on official proclamations, resolutions, and yes, even paychecks) betrays an inherent bias and hostility to the phrase “and Providence Plantations” *prior* to the potential 2020 vote of the electorate, and stands in stark contrast and opposition to the expressed wishes of the electorate from the 2010 ballot measure. This *extreme prejudice*, coming as it does during a time of societal upheaval and attempts across the United States to literally rewrite history, is particularly noxious and nauseating coming, as it has, weeks before the General Assembly has even passed the Resolution to place this matter on the ballot for the electorate to decide, and patently undemocratic coming, as it has, 10 years after the electorate firmly rejected the same ballot question.

In light of this testimony, I fully expect the House Committee on Judiciary, and later, the General Assembly, to pass this Resolution, and I look forward to the wise electorate of Rhode Island soundly rejecting the ballot question, yet again, in November. The intelligence, compassion, and *unyielding* wisdom of Rhode Island voters will see to this.

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