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Which history is relevant — and who decides — marks decadeslong debate over Iowa State's Catt Hall name

ı Catt was at the forefront of the suffragist movement. However, for 26 years, ·ed for Catt Hall on the Iowa State campus to be renamed because she used racist

Isabella Rosario Ames Tribune

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On a cold and rainy afternoon in October 1995, more than 1,000 people gathered outside the building previously called Old Botany for the dedication ceremony of Carrie Chapman Catt Hall.

“I am very proud to have Carrie Chapman Catt as part of Iowa State's history,” then-university president Martin Jischke said of the 1880 graduate. “This building is a symbol of Iowa State’s commitment to equality.”

It had been 75 years since the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which barred states from denying voting rights based on gender. A skilled political strategist, Catt propelled the movement to victory by making inroads in the hostile South, where white politicians were wary of the suffragists' historical connection with abolitionists.

And, like other white suffragists, Catt employed arguments to assuage fears of that past alliance.

“[The] present condition in the South makes sovereigns of some negro men, while all white women are their subjects. These are sad but solemn truths,” Catt wrote in a letter to North Carolina Congressman Edwin Webb. “If you want white supremacy, why not have it constitutionally, honorably? The Federal Amendment offers the way.”

More plainly, Catt once said, “White supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by woman suffrage.”

Another crowd of people gathered outside Catt Hall in June 2020, incensed by what they said were shameless endorsements of white supremacy. Wearing face masks and holding signs saying “Black Lives Matter," the protesters demanded the building no longer be named for someone who “strategically appealed to the prejudices of the time,” as one demonstrator said.

Organizing against the backdrop of a nationwide racial reckoning, those protesters, in part, prompted Iowa State to form a committee that will review requests to remove names from university property.

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This fall, the committee will outline the timeline for making a recommendation to President Wendy Wintersteen on whether to rename Catt Hall. An outside consulting firm, History Associates Inc., is being paid an estimated $33,140 to "gather and organize factual evidence" for the committee, university spokesperson Brian Meyer said.

But this committee is not the first of its kind that Iowa State has formed to address criticism against Catt. And those 2020 protesters were not the first students to push for change on the steps of the 129-year-old building.

From 1995 to 1998, students with the September 29th Movement pushed for the renaming of Catt Hall with letter-writing campaigns, teach-ins and rallies. The name change was the first of their long list of demands, which included increased funding for cultural studies programs and more support for students of color. The name of Catt Hall, the organizers said then and now, is central to equity issues on campus — a “symbol of exclusion” that communicates what and who Iowa State values.

Over two decades later, the 929ers, as they call themselves, say they are skeptical that the university will change the name. But renewed interest in their cause has them speaking out about Catt Hall again, as the nation grapples with how to remember the notable but flawed Americans to whom it has built monuments.

Honoring Carrie Chapman Catt the suffragist, engendering controversy

Demolition of Old Botany was considered several times before Iowa State fundraised $5 million to renovate the building and rename it after Catt. More than 3,000 bricks were purchased for the Plaza of Heroines outside the building, with each engraved name honoring other influential women.

A petition by the Ames League of Women Voters noted Catt's numerous accomplishments. After graduating from Iowa State, Catt became superintendent of Mason City Schools. She was twice president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. After securing the vote for women in the U.S., she helped lead the fight for women's suffrage worldwide.

"Carrie was the architect (of the 19th Amendment) ... the more you get to know her, the more you marvel her," Carole Horowitz, publicist for the Old Botany restoration committee, told the Ames Tribune in 1995.

But other women at Iowa State had raised concerns about Catt's rhetoric, including Celia Naylor, former director of the Margaret Sloss Center for Women and Gender Equity and the first Black woman to hold the position. It was Naylor who told then-Iowa State freshman Meron Wondwosen about the university's decision to honor Catt in the spring of 1994.

"She mentioned that, like a whole bunch of other suffragettes, Catt made these really racist and xenophobic statements," Wondwosen, now an attorney in Washington, D.C., said in June. "And I thought, what? Do people know about this? Does the university know about this?"

On Sept. 29, 1995 — the date for which the student movement was named — Wondwosen published an essay in the Black Student Alliance's newsletter UHURU! called "The Catt is out of the bag: Was she racist?" Wondwosen's essay detailed how Catt connected women's suffrage with white supremacy, discouraged Black women from joining the National American Woman Suffrage Association and referred to Native Americans as "murdering, scalping warrior(s)."

As the newsletter circulated, Iowa State community members spoke out against the university's decision to honor Catt. One impassioned letter to the Iowa State Daily said,

“Every time I walk on those bricks of donors in front of Old Botany I feel like spitting on every single one of them.” In turn, a letter from theater professor emerita Jane Cox — who wrote and performed in a one-woman play about Catt — said that while Catt used “racist arguments,” she was also praised by the Black suffragist Mary Church Terrell.

That November, the Iowa State Daily published an editorial saying the university apparently did not research Catt’s background enough, and that the naming controversy had “torn people apart … all because somebody didn't do their homework.”

But Iowa State administrators insisted that they had done their homework.

“None of the issues raised in letters and columns about allegedly racist remarks by Carrie Chapman Catt was ‘missed,’” wrote Elizabeth Hoffman, an economics professor and then-dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. “We knew of her comments and written remarks that could be viewed as racist.”

In an email to the Ames Tribune, Hoffman said she does not have “any recollection of writing that letter or saying what was in it,” but has since “read a great many of Catt’s writings.”

“The historical record is clear that Carrie Chapman Catt was an advocate for civil rights and voting rights for all Americans,” Hoffman said.

Students protest Catt Hall as 'a symbol of exclusion'

The September 29th Movement started formally organizing in February 1996, when around 25 students and faculty met at the campus Black Cultural Center. Allan Nosworthy, a graduate student studying creative writing, proposed a letter writing campaign.

Movement members drafted a short letter saying that the name had created “an uncomfortable atmosphere on campus” and that the signers looked forward to assisting Iowa State in the renaming process. Five letters signed by an Iowa State community member were delivered to the university president Monday through Friday.

From there, the students’ demands stretched beyond Catt Hall as they sought to “eliminate racism, classism, xenophobia, sexism and homophobia on the campus of Iowa State University, recognizing that changing the name must be the first step in that direction.”

They brought attention to low graduation rates for students of color — in 1996, just 29.4% of Black students were graduating in six years or less, compared to 62.9% of white students, the university's Office of Institutional Research reported at the time. They requested more money for cultural centers and the creation of an Asian American studies program. They held teach-ins about the Black Panthers, Native American sovereignty and LGBTQ rights.

By the fall of 1996, Jischke — who declined to be interviewed for this story — had rejected multiple requests from the movement to meet with a moderator. So, the students decided to hold a meeting in the lobby of Beardshear Hall, the building that houses the president's office. They were denied a permit but decided to gather anyway. As late movement member and former graduate student Milton McGriff told the Iowa State Daily, the group had "exhausted everything in the system and (were) willing to face whatever penalties" would come from their civil disobedience.

On Nov. 5, 1996, nearly 200 students marched from the Memorial Union to Beardshear Hall. Nosworthy, who now teaches English at a Florida public college, remembers standing on the second floor of Beardshear, looking down on everyone neatly clustered in the rotunda.

"The students were making an effort to say, we are not here to stop the business of Beardshear Hall, but we are here to make sure our voice does get heard," Nosworthy said.

Movement members gave nametags to participants willing to be sanctioned and handed those nametags to the dean of students. Around 20 people who named themselves as organizers were charged with handbook violations.

One of them was Bob Mohr, then an Iowa State sophomore.

Mohr believed the name of Catt Hall should be changed because of the suffragist's racist comments. But his motivation to join the movement was sparked by the symbolism he saw in Catt's name, which he said embodied Iowa State's attitude toward students' concerns.

"What I saw was people who were raising their voices and objecting to a process that they thought was exclusionary ... and they were really sidelined," said Mohr, who is now an architect in Rhode Island.

Because they spoke at the Beardshear Hall protest, Wondwosen, Nosworthy and McGriff were originally given misconduct charges that would have barred them from holding leadership positions in student organizations. At the time, Wondwosen was president of the

Black Student Alliance, Nosworthy was president of the Black Cultural Center and McGriff was a student senator. In the end, they were given letters of reprimand and allowed to keep their positions. But the threat of harsher charges, Nosworthy said, was the university's way of "making an example of us."

Mohr, who is white, said that not everybody in favor of honoring Catt is white, but "it's an inescapable fact that the majority of people who are objecting to the name of Catt Hall are people of color."

The next year, Nosworthy went on a six-day hunger strike and was hospitalized. The year after that, Wondwosen, Nosworthy and McGriff were arrested for criminal trespass during a sit-in at Jischke's office. All three students graduated on time — "We were very serious about our studies," Wondwosen said.

The movement's persistence appeared to spur some change at Iowa State, although administrators at the time denied any "appeasement to the Catt Hall controversy."

In the fall of 1996, Jischke appointed a diversity adviser and allocated funds to renovate the Black Cultural Center. An Asian American studies program was added in 1999. And some scholars, including the late Iowa historian Dorothy Schwieder, have long suspected the dedication of Iowa State's football stadium to Jack Trice in 1997 was an effort to placate the September 29th Movement.

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Still, the building bears Catt's name. A 1998 university committee failed to agree on whether the name should be changed.

"With all that has happened over these decades, including all of the focus on the Movement for Black Lives over the past couple of years, the fact that ISU has not changed the name of Catt Hall … is telling," said Naylor, the former Sloss House director, in an email to the Ames Tribune. "If Black lives truly mattered, if Black perspectives mattered, if Black humanity mattered, this would have been resolved long ago."

'Catt did not live in the 21st century,' Catt Center director says

A Twitter thread in June 2020 gave new life to another naming controversy at Iowa State, leading to the swift removal of a bronze plaque south of LeBaron Hall.

The plaque honored William Temple Hornaday, a zoologist who attended Iowa State in the 1800s and received an honorary master's degree in 1903. A few years after receiving that degree, in 1906, Hornaday put a young African man named Ota Benga in a monkey exhibit at the Bronx Zoo. Benga, who had been kidnapped from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, died by suicide a decade later.

In the thread, Iowa State alumna Carleen Silva wrote that Hornaday was celebrated by the university, despite having caged a human being.

Two days after the thread was posted, Wintersteen had the plaque removed and placed in the Parks Library Archive, calling Hornaday's actions "indefensible, reprehensible, and racist" in a letter to the Iowa State community.

About a month later, Wintersteen announced the creation of a committee to establish a policy on renaming university property.

The spectacle of the Hornaday issue also brought renewed attention to Catt Hall. Iowa State alumni, faculty and students joined the call for the name change, leading to the June 2020 protest. A petition to change the name garnered nearly 5,000 signatures. Since last summer, Wondwosen and other movement members have maintained a social media presence for the September 29th Movement.

"It's the right thing to do, and I think there is a sense of, this is unfinished work. There hasn't really been a resolution," Wondwosen said.

Throughout last summer, letters on both sides of the Catt Hall debate ran in the Iowa State Daily and other publications. Even though 25 years had passed since Wondwosen's essay in UHURU!, the arguments for and against changing the name had not changed much.

Much of the disagreement over Catt's character centers on people's interpretation of her saying women's suffrage would strengthen white supremacy, which was a core assertion of her 1917 essay "Objections to the Federal Amendment."

In an essay for Iowa State's alumni association magazine in 2020, the director of the university's Carrie Chapman Catt Center, Karen Kedrowski, said Catt "had no way to

anticipate today's mores."

To Kedrowski, Catt's 1917 argument about white supremacy was merely a statistical one, and not necessarily a full-throated endorsement of the ideology. Using 1910 Census data, Catt reasoned, "white women outnumber both negro males and females by nearly half a million … woman suffrage in the South would so vastly increase the white vote that it would guarantee white supremacy."

"So, was Carrie Chapman Catt a racist?" wrote Kedrowski, who declined to speak on the record for this story. "Certainly if we look at some of her statements with 21st century eyes and values. … Yet, importantly, Catt did not live in the 21st century."

Dianne Bystrom, who served as director of the Catt Center from 1996 to 2018, said via email that Catt's white supremacy quote was "not an appeal to racism," adding that "Catt's use of statistics here is a numerical, not ideological, argument."

"There are numerous examples of Catt's support of racial equality and votes for all women, which should be included in an objective news story examining her life and legacy," Bystrom said.

It's true that in various writings, Catt called for the enfranchisement of Black women and women of color around the world. But Black women "sometimes accused her of talking out of two sides of her mouth, depending on what audience she was speaking to," said Marjorie Spruill, a retired University of South Carolina history professor.

Catt's public positions on certain political issues did not always align with her private stances, Spruill said.

"Instead of fighting for prohibition or pacifism or African American rights — all of which were things that she believed in — she put aside her personal views … to try to win the federal women's suffrage amendment," Spruill said.

The South was the ultimate "nemesis" of this goal, as Spruill wrote in a recent essay.

Because of the suffragists' historical connection with abolitionists, white Southern legislators saw the 19th Amendment as a threat to their goal of maintaining white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction era — a system buoyed by legal disenfranchisement and extrajudicial violence.

If it had been totally up to Catt, in Spruill's analysis of her writings, "every literate person, regardless of race, sex or creed, should be able to vote."

"But Catt recognized that going out and being an overt advocate of Black women voting on the same basis as white women … would have been probably crippling to their chances of getting any Southern states to ratify," Spruill said.

Catt supported the use of literacy tests, a tool disproportionately manipulated to disenfranchise Black citizens that also often excluded poor white citizens from the democratic process.

That was a personal sticking point for Heather Strachan, who joined the September 29th Movement as a freshman in 1996. Strachan, who now works for a mental health nonprofit in Des Moines, grew up in poverty in rural Iowa.

"We talk about Carrie Chapman Catt fighting for white women's suffrage — she still didn't represent me. She represented landowning, rich white women," Strachan said.

And for Strachan and other movement members, the question of whether Catt truly held prejudices or used racism for political expediency is a distinction without a difference.

"The interesting thing to us is … what happens when you are in that moment, where you are pushing for something that you've been fighting for and you've been confronted with a moral crisis?" Wondwosen said during a virtual talk at the Sloss House last year. "Do you take the moral stance, or do you say, I really want to pass the 19th Amendment … so I'm going to go ahead and betray everything that Black women have been working for?"

Student activists are met with hostility, scholar says

Wesley Harris graduated with a Ph.D. in education in May from Iowa State. In the fall of 2015, he found "some very small mention" of the September 29th Movement while poring over the university's diversity reports online.

He was struck by how the movement's diversity-related demands paralleled the ones being made at the time by Iowa State students. The university had just held a community-wide discussion about discrimination on campus, after students protesting then-candidate Donald Trump's visit were harassed with racial slurs.

“It was so intriguing because there were just so many layers to what was happening in the movement that also mirrored what was happening on campus,” Harris said.

The following summer, Harris and his friend Alade McKen teamed up to rebuild the September 29th Movement’s website for a class project. Their goal was to preserve as much as they could of the original website’s archive, digitize the microfilm of missing news articles and fix broken links to other lost documents.

“When we were asking folks … about the September 29th Movement, we were finding out that either people didn't know about it, or people knew and had forgotten,” Harris said. “And we're like, how can this student movement that existed for three academic years, that had so many things that happened, how is nobody talking about this?”

Wearing a shirt saying “Change the Name,” Harris stood on the steps of Catt Hall as he spoke at last summer’s protest. He considers himself part of the September 29th Movement.

“Our scholarship should be actively engaged in trying to build the world that we want to see and to live in,” Harris said.

As college campuses across the country reckon with their fraught legacies, the prestige gilded in the names of some historical figures has become tarnished for many.

In June, George Washington University announced it will rename the student center named after a former university president who supported segregation. Last November, the University of California, Berkeley renamed two buildings that had honored former faculty who espoused racist views. And last summer, Princeton University trustees voted to remove Woodrow Wilson's name from the School of Public and International Affairs, citing the former president's re-segregation of multiple federal agencies.

At those universities and others that have made similar changes, multiracial coalitions of students — often led by Black students — had protested the names for years prior.

Historically, universities' responses to demands by students of color have been "punitive," said Lori Patton Davis, chair of the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University.

Even if students are not arrested, "the punitive piece comes in when institutional leaders decide, 'I'm not going to listen to you because you are not approaching me respectfully' or

'I'm not going to listen to you because the demands are unreasonable,'" Patton Davis said.

In the 1960s and 1970s, college student protests were more commonly met with violence, Patton Davis said.

"But now, the violence is more epistemic in nature, more around spirit murder or making you feel as if you are invisible," Patton Davis said.

It has been over a century since Catt helped secure ratification of the 19th Amendment, and more than 25 years since an effort to honor her grew into something much more. Those for and against changing the name of Catt Hall seem to agree that everything one could say about her place in Iowa State's history has been said.

The decision of whether to rename the building — just like the ceremony to honor Catt in 1995 — will mark another crucial moment in the suffragist's posthumous legacy.

"The fundamental truth is not just about what Catt did and her statements, but this notion of: Who gets to decide which history is relevant?" Wondwosen said. "Who gets to decide who tells a story?"

Isabella Rosario is a public safety reporter for the Ames Tribune. She can be reached by email at irosario@gannett.com or on Twitter at @irosarioc.